BUILDING POWER

HOW ORGANIZED LABOR IS SHAPING INDUSTRIAL RELATIONS IN THE CHANGING SWISS CONSTRUCTION INDUSTRY

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Abstract

In the Swiss construction industry, industrial relations are embedded in an institutional arrangement of “social partnership”. Yet despite these institutionalized relations, tensions have grown and new forms of precarious work are shaping the country’s construction sites. Reflecting greater upheavals unfolding throughout the Western world, structural changes born out of a duet of neoliberal offensives and economic uncertainty are not only altering the labor process, but have created an increasingly fragmented labor force.

Embedded in an intense union campaign in 2015, this ethnography explores these changes and asks how the industry’s largest trade union is coping with these challenges and how it is seeking to enhance its capacity as a collective agent shaping industrial relations. Empirically, it becomes clear that the union is attempting to revitalize by developing more systematic mobilization strategies, but also by pursuing an emancipatory approach empowering workplace leaders themselves. While the two can go hand in hand, their relationship represents a complex and sometimes contradictory balancing act. Theoretically, it becomes apparent that we are dealing with a multilayered process of labor renewal where collective action is neither pessimistically improbable nor optimistically given. Instead, it must be constructed as a processual dialogue between a changing political economic environment, the historical development of industrial relations and the union’s own agency.

Zusammenfassung

Die industriellen Beziehungen der Schweizer Bauwirtschaft sind in einem komplexen institutionellen Arrangement der „Sozialpartnerschaft“ eingebettet. Doch trotz diesen institutionalisierten Verhältnissen haben Spannungen zugenommen und prekäre Arbeitsformen prägen zunehmend die Baustellen. Als Teil grösserer Umbrüche durch die westliche Welt haben strukturelle Veränderungen als duales Produkt neoliberaler Offensiven und ökonomischer Unsicherheit nicht nur den Arbeitsprozess verändert, sondern auch eine fragmentierte Arbeiterschaft entstehen lassen.

Eingebettet in einer intensiven Gewerkschaftskampagne in 2015, erforscht diese Ethnografie jene Veränderungen und geht der Frage nach, wie die Gewerkschaft mit diesen Herausforderungen umgeht. Empirisch wird deutlich, dass die Gewerkschaft sich mittels systematischen Mobilisierungsstrategien, aber auch anhand eines emanzipatorischen *Empowerment*-Ansatzes zu erneuern versucht. Obwohl die beiden Ansätze sich ergänzen können, ist ihre Beziehung komplex und nicht immer ohne Widersprüche. Aus theoretischer Sicht geht hervor, dass wir es mit einem vielschichtigen Prozess der Gewerkschaftserneuerung zu tun haben, in dem kollektives Handeln weder per se unwahrscheinlich noch von Anfang an gegeben ist. Vielmehr muss es aktiv konstruiert werden als prozessualer Dialog zwischen einer sich verändernden politischen Ökonomie, der historischen Entwicklung der industriellen Beziehungen und der eigenen Handlungsfähigkeit der Gewerkschaft.

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Literary Note

As this thesis covers a broad empirical as well as theoretical scope, I have discussed and referred to a diverse palette of both English and German literature on social scientific theory as well as on the broader subject of organized labor and collective action. Direct German quotes were translated by myself into English. The original titles are noted in the bibliography.

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This dissertation represents a product of years of participant observation, lively discussions on construction sites and in union offices and constantly developing social scientific reflections on the broader subject of a changing construction industry and the role of organized labor therein. Throughout this entire time, my academic supervisor Peter Finke has not only actively encouraged my research, but significantly contributed to many of the theoretical insights developed in this thesis. Both his academic guidance and inspiring personal support were decisive for the successful completion of this dissertation. I also want to particularly thank Ueli Mäder, my second academic supervisor, for providing me with valuable advice from the perspective of a different discipline and for equally encouraging my research in the field of industrial relations and organized labor in Switzerland. I am further grateful to Stefan Leins and Heinz Käufeler of the Department of Social Anthropology and Cultural Studies (ISEK) of the University of Zurich for their constant support and valuable advice. I further owe thanks to the participants of the 2015 International Labor Workshop at the University of Iowa, sponsored by the National Science Foundation. In particular E. Paul Durrenberger and Susan Erem, but also a number of the other anthropologists present, provided me with helpful inputs.

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Part I

Starting our Journey: Labor, Anthropology and Theory

1. Introduction: Laboring for Anthropology

The assembly took place in a large meeting hall adorned with bright red flags and streamers. It was lit with a dimly glowing red light and around four hundred people sat in neat rows. They listened to speaker after speaker on the stage up front. Some of the onlookers went up to the stage to speak themselves. The others diligently listened with headphones in their ears and professional interpreters steadily translating in little boxes from behind. The vast majority were men. And despite the high-tech lighting, rather lavish catering enjoyed during the lunch break and the presence of around ten professional translators for four different languages, the participants themselves did not give the impression that this was their daily routine. While some of them had even donned three piece suits and almost all were cleanly shaven with neatly combed hair, their weathered skin, especially that of the older ones, held more stories of decades of hard outdoor work than of catered conventions and flashy events.

In what seemed to represent an intermission between the speeches, the participants got up and neatly dispersed into twenty different rooms. Animated by one or two designated coaches encouraging them and providing tips, the four hundred or so participants carried out role plays and practiced their communications skills. They then returned to the plenum.

Later that afternoon everybody in the room suddenly got up, streamed through the now open doors and – despite rain pouring down and heavy winds – energetically took to the streets and fell in to form a neatly ordered structure. The newly formed procession, now carrying hundreds of red and white flags, then left the conference center behind them and proceeded to march down to the city center. Despite the smiles on their faces – the participants were clearly enjoying this – the words blasting out of the bullhorn held by one of the participants made it clear that this was no festive parade.

The above participants were in fact Swiss construction workers who had just formally launched their 2015 union campaign aimed at renewing and improving their collective labor agreement, which is renegotiated every three years. While in the past decade, this contract-renewal ritual has repeatedly been accompanied by clashes between employers and the unions over their antagonistic interests and demands, something

far greater was at stake this year. The construction industry's model for early retirement, enabling construction workers to retire five years earlier than the standard age, was in dire need of additional funding due to the generation of "baby-boomers" going into retirement within the next few years. While Unia, the largest union in the industry, proposed raising both employer and employee contributions to secure current benefits, the employers ridiculed this idea and – referring to wider debates on retirement – demanded that the pension age either be raised or workers' pensions themselves reduced.

Transcending a simple technical argument or even a question of "narrow" material interests, the employers' nonchalant disregard for something the workers perceived as almost holy hit a raw nerve. In fact, the deep sentimental character of this issue thus had the potential for turning an otherwise perhaps ritualistic contract-renewal campaign into one perceived as more or less existential. And it was primarily this subject, next to demands for clearer rules on closing down sites during bad weather and sharper measures against so-called *wage-dumping*, that had visibly awoken the emotions of the workers who had travelled from all over Switzerland to take part in the gathering depicted above. Debating amongst themselves about the changing construction economy, the necessity of early retirement for men of hard labor and the injustice of even the suggestion that the latter might be called into question, a wide variety of languages could be detected: from German to French and Italian, but also Portuguese, Spanish and Albanian among others. The same debates would come to be heard on construction sites throughout the country in the months to come.

With the kick-off rally above began a union campaign that would bring about the largest worker mobilizations of a single industry in the last decade of Switzerland's history. It would become a campaign lived, seen, felt and whose fate would ultimately be decided on the construction sites throughout the country. It would furthermore reach thousands of otherwise uninvolved people at home through newspapers and television. For all of the participants directly involved though, whether construction workers, activists or union organizers, it would become a campaign alternately generating feelings of tension and relief, anger and happiness, frustration and satisfaction and also a proud awareness of both individual and collective agency.

Thus also begins our ethnographic exploration of the subject, one looking at the changing environment of Swiss construction and the activities of Unia, the largest

and most active trade union therein. This ethnography is the study of how the labor process as well as the industrial relations of a key industry are changing and how the workers' trade union is attempting to radically adapt to those changes. Bringing the two together, this ethnography aims to shed light not only on the union and on the actions of the thousands of people driving it forward, but also upon the changing and often challenging political economic and institutional context within which these actions are embedded. Diving deep into the greater processes of change unfolding both within the industry as well as within the union, this is an ethnography of economic and organizational change, individual and collective agency and the diverse actions of the actors involved in all of the above.

From the perspective of economic anthropology, one can hardly imagine a more fascinating field. For we are provided with a unique gateway to study not only how coalitions of workers take action in pursuit of their collective interests, but also one enabling us to illuminate the everyday effects of greater economic upheavals on said collective action. Transcending the subject of (organized) labor, by exploring how, when and under what circumstances people cooperate in order to bring about greater institutional change, this ethnography has at its heart cardinal questions of the social sciences in general.

This ethnography is, however, also embedded in a strong personal interest. Like countless other social scientists, in particular those studying questions of social conflict, my interest in the field of study goes beyond an exclusively academic and scientific one. I am a member of the trade union movement and have no qualms in admitting that I see it as one of the most important motors for positive change in today's society. This is not an anthropological case of "going native". My involvement in labor activism and social movements is older than my relationship to the discipline of social anthropology. For a number of years, however, these two passions have become deeply entwined in what I believe has led to a potentially fruitful alliance between the two – something into which I will go into more detail below.[1]

Writing this thesis in 2017, we can no doubt claim to live in dynamic and uncertain times – be that in the changing Swiss construction industry or within the global arena

[1] As I have been studying questions of structural change in the Swiss construction industry for some time now and this thesis seeks to actively build on some of the theoretical as well as empirical insights gained in those efforts, some of the thoughts expressed in this thesis have, in far less depth, previously been discussed in Kelley 2012; 2014a; 2014b; 2017.

of neoliberal capitalism. While often worrying and depressing, turbulent and stormy, these times are also sprinkled with truly inspiring episodes. And from a social scientific perspective, they are absolutely gripping. Institutions, customs and rules that were over decades taken for granted are now actively and openly called into question by the various actors involved. People of various social backgrounds and even age groups have begun to take part in collective action aimed at changing society as they see fit – in many cases people who had previously remained passive when it came to "political" questions such as these. The consequences of all of these developments will no doubt be great, whether positive or negative remains to be seen. What is already clear, however, is that the political economic and cultural upheavals we are currently witnessing open up unique gateways of opportunity for the anthropologist willing to enter. Such a journey is not only an academic chance to illuminate the dramatic processes unfolding, but also represents a duty of the social sciences today – namely one developing a better understanding of our changing political economy, the affects these changes are having on the everyday lives of the actors within and also the consequences of their own actions on the world in which they live, work and dream.

A Few Words to Begin: Labor Unions in Crisis and Renewal

Before more closely defining the particular case study at hand and our research questions arising thereof, it makes sense to first discuss the greater and more global scope in which they are embedded. Since at least the 1990s, many if not most trade unions throughout the Western world, in the "societies of developed capitalism" (Urban 2008: 7), have found themselves in a deep and in some cases existential crisis. This has meanwhile been widely discussed in the social sciences from a variety of different perspectives and has involved both quantitative and qualitative approaches and methods (Bronfenbrenner et al. 1998; Oesch 2007; Brinkmann et al. 2008; Crosby 2009; Dörre and Schmalz 2013).

This crisis of organized labor is embodied by the fact that, with very few exceptions, ever-smaller proportions of the workforce are organized by these supposed "dinosaurs of the industrial age" (Dörre and Schmalz 2013: 13). At the turn of the century, between 1993 and 2003, European trade unions had on average lost 15 percent of their membership (Dörre et al. 2009: 33). Although this might at first be explained through shifts in the economy away from more traditional union heartlands

and towards the service sector, in many countries even the degree of organization in more classic bastions of organized labor is sinking. Directly connected to this loss in membership, unions in many countries have suffered a severe loss of financial resources, thus further limiting their opportunities and in some cases leading to a seemingly unbreakable vicious circle.

Besides this loss of membership and political influence, however, many unions have also suffered a loss of agency or in other words a loss of the ability to mobilize even their still existing membership into industrial action when needed. At the same time unions' membership statistics plummeted, the frequency, intensity and rate of participation in strike actions have also decreased in almost all capitalist countries (Deppe 2012: 55). It goes without saying that if a union without the ability to strike can only engage in "collective begging" (Güntner 2015), this loss of mobilizing capacity has proven to be just as great a blow to organized labor as that of its membership losses. This is particularly the case today, as we can safely assume that at least in the Western world we are living in the most hostile atmosphere to organized labor in the post-war era. Both of these deterioration processes, that of membership loss and receding mobilization ability, have led to a severe decline of unions' abilities to shape the political economy, thus also going hand in hand with an "erosion of institutional power" of the unions (Dörre et al. 2009: 43). Mildly put, organized labor, whose associations once prided themselves as being a pillar of workers' lives, culture and everyday realities, is on the defensive.

A wide variety of sometimes plausible, sometimes rather banal explanations have been developed to make sense of this process, which, if it continues, may lead to a "capitalism without unions" (Müller-Jentsch 2006). Most scholars would agree on two fundamental focal points in this debate. First of all, global economic processes intertwined with technological developments have unleashed deep structural changes in many western economies, thus leading to the loss or in many cases outsourcing of blue collar jobs to other parts of the world. Given the fact that these professions represented a large portion of hitherto union membership, this loss of jobs also translated into loss of union members. That being said, it simultaneously points to the glaringly decisive failure of trade unions in many countries to organize the growing service sector (Rieger et al. 2012).

Second of all, and by no means separable from the economic shifts in global capital mentioned above, both a large number of employers as well as the increasingly neoliberally dominated state apparatuses of many countries have dealt systematic and significant blows to unions on both a company and industry level as well as on a political one. This has been expressed through the termination or dismantling of existing collective labor agreements, through the so-called “union-busting” of labor structures and the systematic dismissal of worker activists, yet also in the form of anti-union legislature making it more difficult to organize as well as strike (Kelly 1998; Bronfenbrenner et al. 1998; Durrenberger and Erem 2005; Durrenberger and Reichart (eds.) 2010).

This complex process must thus be contextualized within the semi-global shift from “nationally organized welfare-state-capitalism“ (Urban 2008: 7) to the now dominant “transnational financial capitalism“ (ibid) with its neoliberal “market fundamentalism“ (Stiglitz 2009). It is the unleashing of the latter that has not only changed the lives of millions of people the unions represent, but has also put trade unions everywhere in an increasingly weak position to challenge the sweeping erosion of the hitherto stable post-war Keynesianist wage labor system, which guaranteed social welfare and provided secure, full-time job opportunities for large parts of the workforce (Wacquant 2008; Pelizzari 2009; Mäder and Schmassmann 2013; Spyridakis 2013).

In this neoliberal turn that has become increasingly powerful if not even semi-hegemonial throughout the Western world (Harvey 2005), both formal and informal labor regulations and standards have either been reduced or even completely dismantled. These processes have been encouraged by and have themselves further encouraged the introduction of precarious forms of wage labor and led to the stagnation of the wages of countless workers (Mäder and Schmassmann 2013). A “destablization of the stable” (Castel in Flecker 2008: 81) had thus unfolded and, as Bourdieu noted, precariousness was suddenly everywhere (1998).

In the words of Lévesque and Murray:

> There are moments in organizational and institutional history when things are just up for grabs. As previous arrangements come unstuck, and union capacity weakens, union resources and capabilities come increasingly under the microscope. Some of the

old resources need to be reconfigured or invigorated; the capabilities do not seem to be calibrated to the new context. (2010: 346)

This is one of those moments.

While some of the unions facing this potentially fatal crisis have chosen to stand by and wait for better days in a desperate sense of hibernation (Lopez 2004), and others have even propagated appeasing capital by taking a more cooperative stance (Kochan and Osterman in Kelly 1998: 1), a third group has embraced a more active position. These latter unions share the belief that despite or even because of the currently hostile political economic atmosphere, unions can and in fact must make a *strategic choice* to change and revitalize (Bronfenbrenner et al. 1998; Voss and Sherman 2000; Durrenberger and Erem 2005; Brinkmann et al. 2008; Getman 2010; Schmalz and Dörre 2013). It is in the sense of this strategic choice that these unions have taken the decision to shed the shackles of the determinist and fatalistic "crisis-paradigm" (Urban 2008: 7) and instead devote their efforts, energy and resources towards radically altering the way they function in this new era of capitalism.

This innovative push towards trade union revitalization has generally been articulated along broad ideas of perceiving organized labor more as a form social movement than as a representative service-provider and a deep, underlying belief that a successful, broad-based union movement can only come about through active member participation and mobilization (Lopez 2004). This approach has gone under a number of banners, such as *social movement unionism, strategic unionism* or simply: *the organizing model*.

While large "varieties of unionism" (Frege and Kelly 2004) exist, shaped by the surrounding political economic and institutional environment as well as the specific historical experiences and backgrounds of the organizations, and there is a heated debate as to what the organizing-model actually entails (Dörre et al. 2009), I will employ the following description: *The organizing model can be seen as an approach using innovative and systematic methods and strategies with the goal of activating and empowering workers to participate in broad, comprehensive campaigns using unconventional and often disruptive methods with the long-term goal of shifting power relations in worker favor* (derived from Bronfenbrenner et al. 1998, Voss and Sherman 2000, Dörre et al. 2009).

The main goal of this approach is thus to strengthen and build a union's ability to empower workers to carry out collective action through "experimentation, innovation, and wide-ranging internal debate regarding strategic direction and tactical choice" (Turner 2004: 6). While this approach places an obvious emphasis and priority on collective strength and worker mobilizations, it is not necessarily a dogmatic one and opportunities arising from relevant institutional arrangements, whether broader laws or collective labor agreements between employers and unions, can play an essential role in a union's campaign. That being said, what the proponents of the above approach remind us of is that while institutional power can be useful, it must not go forgotten that institutions such as collective labor agreements and labor legislation often arise from social conflict and are thus by no means safe or indefinite (Brinkmann et al. 2008; Schmalz and Dörre 2013). It is in this sense that while institutional opportunities may indeed reinforce collective organization and action, they can never completely substitute it. This was a lesson that many of these unions in change had painfully learned just years before.

Interestingly enough, this systematic process of labor renewal actually has its roots in the United States, whose trade unions were hitherto "looked upon rather pitifully" (Dörre et al. 2009) and were better known for their politically conservative stance and sluggish bureaucracy than for any progressive labor concepts (Voss and Sherman 2000). While it may seem paradoxical at first that such a clear emphasis on movement-oriented unionism would come from the United States, this is upon second glance rather logical. Precisely because the unions in the US have come under such vicious attack by employers as well as by the state, they had little choice but to either wither away or let the crisis at hand push them into a new era. While the labor movement in the US continues to lose ground and under the new government of Donald Trump will probably come under even greater attack than before, unions embracing the organizing model have been able to boast tremendous successes, both in terms of membership growth and gaining concessions.

As such, the experiences and innovative approaches developed by US unions have fallen on open ears in some Western European trade unions such as the service sector union *Ver.di* in Germany or its sister union *IG Metall* of the same country. Perceiving the ability to learn and adapt as a central skill to union revitalization (Lévesque and Murray 2010), Ver.di has worked with and brought in advisors from

American trade unions in order to enhance their organizing successes. This approach to learning and developing new skills for organizing, activating and empowering members has, however, not remained isolated to Germany. In fact, one of the unions that has begun to experiment with such ideas is the focus of our thesis, the multi-industry trade union *Unia* in Switzerland.

Born in 2005 out of a marriage between the country's two largest unions, the *Construction and Industry Union* and the *Swiss Metal and Watchworkers Union*, the dream was a large, multi-industry, social movement- and campaign-oriented union, that would, at least in the long term, go beyond simple questions of bread and butter and become powerful enough in the workplace as well as wider political sphere so as to shape what Wolf termed the political-economic "settings themselves" (1999: 5). This ambitious endeavor, especially in a historical era where most unions are losing and not gaining strength, not only meant regaining membership strength and mobilizing ability in already organized branches with collective labor agreements (CLAs), such as industrial manufacturing, but also organizing key branches of the hitherto "union-free" service sector.

While Unia has managed to make headway in certain areas of the service sector, in particular in hotels and catering, retail and newly health care, the largest and one of the most active sectors, both in numbers and mobilization-ability, continues to be one of its historical bastions of strength: the main construction trades. An industry whose workers have since at least the end of the 19th century primarily been made up of immigrants, the industry has long carried a popular reputation of being *kämpferisch* (roughly translated to militant) and *streikfreudig* (ready to go on strike). The industry's collective labor agreement, continuously negotiated between the unions and employers since 1938, reflects this high level of union activity and is, from a worker perspective, one of the most favorable CLAs of the country.

That being said, a number of multilayered and interconnected processes within the construction industry as well as within its wider political economic surroundings have begun to challenge this hitherto seemingly undefeatable labor stronghold (Kelley 2012; 2014a; 2014b; 2017). Gradually unfolding structural changes in the construction economy, creating a constantly intensifying vicious circle of labor precarization, subcontracting and temporary employment have not only threatened

workers' salaries and job-security, but have also produced an increasingly fragmented workforce with different realities, hopes, dreams and problems. This, in turn, has made it substantially more difficult for the union to mobilize workers into a collective whole capable of concerted action (ibid).

While there is no doubt a dose of historical nostalgia bestowed upon past generations of construction workers, portraying them as some kind of proletarian avant-garde eager to strike at any minute, the union's experiences on the construction sites in the last number of years clearly suggest that the hurdles for concerted action have grown. "It has just gotten harder. They simply won't be moved like they were in the past.", was the somber comment of a former leading union officer of Unia's construction sector who has been active in the union for around thirty years. Another union veteran noted in a similarly bleak mood that: "It's like it's a new generation of construction workers. It's just not the same."

Given that the global shift to a more neoliberal and aggressive stance towards organized labor has not left Swiss construction untouched, thus producing an increasingly rough climate between the union and the construction employers association, the growing hurdles to collective action (and thus bargaining power) have become a growing headache for Unia. While a high degree of membership and thus representation may gain them a place at the negotiating table and a certain legitimacy in the public and political sphere, a large but inactive membership will not provide the union with the amount of bargaining power it needs in order to actually gain – or even defend – concessions. In 2011, during the last round of re-negotiations of the collective labor agreement, the union came face to face with its own problems on the ground. Despite intense preparations for strikes in various cities, Unia's construction leadership judged its ability to successfully carry out these strikes to be insufficient in order to actually produce enough pressure to push through their demands. The strikes were called off in the last minute and a compromise was grudgingly signed.

While the union's main demands were not reached in that particular round of contract renewal, the frustrating experiences arising therefrom did have a significant effect. As is often the case with trade unions in critical situations (Brinkmann et al. 2008), or troubled organizations in general for that matter, the stage was now set for a serious

and reflected debate about the future. While this was not a debate between a service model versus an organizing model, as the dominant discourse was already one of a campaign-oriented, organizing union, it was a debate concerning the particular micro-mechanisms necessary to translate such a dream into reality and win back strength on the construction sites. In a situation like this, which is as Durrenberger points out an intertwining of social, political, cultural and economic phenomena (2007: 75), another scene is also set: that of the anthropologist.

Research Objectives and Thesis Structure

Despite my personal association with the Swiss labor movement, it must be emphasized that I am writing this thesis from the perspective of a social anthropologist interested in furthering social scientific knowledge on the wider subject of changing (organized) labor. The questions, findings and theoretical insights are thus encapsulated in social scientific debates and theory and I have neither the illusion nor the explicit goal that the thesis at hand will or even should become a "must-read" within the labor movement. I will illuminate, analyze and discuss the processes at hand from an anthropological point of view, even when such insights might seem uninteresting or even mundane from the more operative point of view of its protagonists, i.e. worker activists and organizers.

At the same time, however, just as my personal history may have permeable boundaries when it comes to anthropology and the labor movement, it would be naïve to suggest that the boundaries between the latter two themselves are necessarily any less fluid. So, while I am explicitly writing this thesis from an anthropological perspective, the debates unfolding within it cannot remain completely restricted to the ivory tower of academia. In the spirit of the critical "public sociology" impassionedly encouraged by Michael Burawoy (2005a; 2005b), I see it as only fitting that this product should, whenever possible, be in touch with the public debates that are of concern to the actors and issues at hand. This does not and cannot mean ignoring the equally real differences of what it means to carry out research from a scientific in contrast to an organizational perspective, but it should, from time to time, mean being open to transcending boundaries and also daring to "see our discipline from the point of view of labor and ask how our work might be relevant for labor struggles throughout the world." (Kasmir 2009: 76).

By carrying out this ethnography of organized labor in Swiss construction, I wish to contribute to the growing anthropology of labor as well as to the wider and interdisciplinary labor revitalization studies. In previous ethnographic research carried out in 2011 and 2012 (Kelley 2012), I studied the deep structural upheavals unfolding in the construction industry mentioned above: new and precarious forms of labor and a growing fragmentation of the workforce. While highlighting some of the challenges arising for the union therefrom, I did not actually shed light on the agency of the union and union activists themselves. In other words, I looked at a part of the problem, but stopped short of analyzing the agency of the union when it came to coping with these obstacles.

In this doctoral thesis, I will take that next step. Yet instead of focusing on organized labor's agency as something isolated from the world unfolding around it, I will explore the union's strategies as embedded in the changing labor world and political economy within which it functions. This is, regretfully, something that has rarely been done. For while the growing labor revitalization studies have produced some excellent and in-depth studies of union strategies, rarely have they more deeply taken into account the labor world within which these strategies take place. This ethnography brings the two together and does just that.

As such, the main research question guiding us is as follows: *In the context of a changing and increasingly hostile Swiss construction industry, how is the largest trade union operating therein adapting so as to enhance its power as a collective agent shaping industrial relations?*

In other words, how is the union trying to defy the growing structural obstacles as well as the counter-agency of other actors acting against it when it comes to organizing collective action as a means to building bargaining power.

Of course, collective action also encompasses the individual recruitment of "passive" union members. This aspect is undoubtedly important. That being said, we will concentrate our explorations on the union's collective activation of workers in the sense of industrial action. For interestingly enough, the above noted threat to organized labor's mobilization capacity in Swiss construction has so far not correlated with a decline in union membership itself. The main construction trades,

with around seventy percent of its workers organized in a union[2], continues to be one of the most densely organized sectors of the Swiss economy. This can, as will become clear, at least partially be explained by the fact that since union members in the Swiss system of industrial relations are recruited on an individual basis, the emerging cracks in the workforce as a collective are less relevant thereto. Furthermore, especially in growingly precarious times such as these, individual reliance on the union for dealing with individual legal problems has, if anything, actually grown due to the higher number of labor malpractices.

In order to pursue this question, the union's 2015 contract-renewal campaign will be used as a platform providing us both with a fountain of empirical material as well as a space within which the social phenomenon of collective action itself most visibly unfolds. It is, however, important to emphasize that since the focus of this thesis is neither a chronological nor a historiographical one, but concentrated on the broader social scientific issues of organized labor and collective action, it will not represent a chronology of the campaign. Far more, this thesis seeks to use the empirical material collected in this campaign in order to gain insight on a far deeper level and to unearth patterns and complex social phenomena.

Starting from the main research question and ambitions noted above, I have structured this thesis along four main parts made up of seven chapters:

- This introductory chapter will continue by discussing the ethnographic methods used in the study as well as the unique opportunities and challenges born out of my situation as a particularly entwined participant observer. I will then conclude the chapter by providing the reader with a short overview of the growing literature on trade union renewal in times of crisis as well as the small but dynamic literature arising from anthropological studies of changing organized labor.

- The second chapter of this thesis is dedicated to social scientific theory. I will begin by equipping myself first with a methodological approach emphasizing the necessity of bringing ethnographic methods into discussion with social scientific theory. Michael Burawoy's thoughts on the extended case method

[2] While Unia is by far the largest union in construction, Syna, a smaller union with its historical roots in the Catholic labor tradition, also exists.

offer such an approach and help us to not only make sense of the often great mass of data collected, but also allow that data to contribute to the greater task of enhancing existing theory and thus contributing to science in general. With this in mind, we will proceed to assemble our own theoretical toolbox tailored to the study of union strategies embedded in their political economic and institutional context. Critically and selectively borrowing from various theoretical traditions touching the different issues of this study, ranging from Marxist political economy to theories focused on the micro-mechanisms of collective action, we will search for an appropriate explanatory model based on the idea of "theory networks" (Bollig and Finke 2014).

- In part two, we will enter the empirical part of our study and explore the dual transformations unfolding in the labor world of the Swiss construction industry and in its industrial relations. Our first destination here, discussed in chapter three, will be to critically dissect the voyage the Swiss labor movement has taken since its beginnings in the late 19th and early 20th century. This will not represent a historical overview for the sake of it, but one that is vital to revealing the complex social institutions that have arisen from labor and capital's meanwhile chequered relationship of conflict and cooperation. It will also help us comprehend the position in which organized labor finds itself today. Looking back at our theory chapter, we are reminded that while social institutions may arise from social conflict between actors with different interests and asymmetrical power relations (Knight 1992), in the end they can have very ambiguous effects – both emancipating and constraining – on all actors involved. Furthermore, while power relations stemming from institutional arrangements can serve organized labor's interests, these arrangements can and do change and as such can never be an exclusive substitute for the union's collective or associational power that helped bring about those institutions in the first place.

- Shifting our view to the economic functioning of the Swiss construction industry itself, chapter four is dedicated to unraveling the structures and inner workings of this dynamic economic sector. On the one hand, this means examining the political economic parameters of the industry as a whole as well as the profound role the collective labor agreement plays not only in protecting

workers' wages and working conditions, but also in shaping the economy of the industry. On the other hand, this chapter will examine the transformational changes unfolding in the industry, changes born out of a duet of neoliberal offensives and economic uncertainty. Besides producing new and more precarious forms of employment threatening the individual interests of thousands of workers active in the industry, this upheaval is also changing the composition and social dynamics of the labor force as a whole. As can be imagined, the effects on a union attempting to mobilize a growingly fragmented workforce into a collective force capable of concerted action are dramatic.

- After having painted a clearer picture of the dual transformations unfolding and the effects these have had on the collective agency of organized labor, part three of this thesis will shift our focus onto the agency of the union itself. Chapter five explores the frontline organizing efforts of the union's "Mittelland" region, a regional unit that has made it a priority to develop a new and systematic approach enabling it to "organize in chaos". This chapter not only studies the organizational changes this regional unit has introduced and the process-oriented model it has established, but also discusses the collective action frames union organizers create in order to not only justify collective action, but also to reveal its utility from a rational, calculated perspective. And finally, we will witness how organizers' ideas are applied to – and sometimes collide with – the empirical reality of everyday life on the construction sites of the region.

- As will become clear, while collective mobilizations during campaigns per se involve collective dynamics, they also rely on the specific efforts of active individuals. Next to the activities of staff organizers as described in the previous chapter, chapter six will shed light on the decisive activities of (often informal) workplace leaders. In fact, besides a greater political aspiration to empower workers to take over more responsibility in the sense of a grassroots- and social-movement-oriented union, labor leaders are convinced that in the long term such an approach is vital to organized labor's survival. However, given the still lingering legacy of years of welfare capitalism and industrial peace, during which the union's modus operandi took on a more

representative and staff-based approach, such a transformation towards a union truly driven by worker activists is far from a simple task. We will thus explore the concentrated efforts of the union in this realm, yet also debate the sometimes contradictory relationship these efforts have with the organizer-driven efforts discussed in the previous chapter.

- Having started this thesis with the aspiration of producing an in-depth ethnographic study of how the union is seeking to enhance its power as a collective agent in an increasingly hostile environment of labor and industrial relations, this thesis concludes with insights both on an empirical as well as on a theoretical level. From an empirical standpoint, it will become clear that the union is attempting to revitalize itself by developing new strategies of mobilization based on systematic methods and a creative model of collective action frames, but also by introducing a more emancipatory approach seeking to empower workplace activists themselves. While the two can go hand in hand, their relationship is not always harmonious, thus making it a complex and sometimes contradictory balancing act for the union. What will become clear from a theoretical standpoint is that we are dealing with a case where collective action is neither pessimistically improbable nor optimistically given, but arises as a product of a complex processual dialogue between a changing political economic and institutional environment, the historical development of industrial relations in the industry and the union's own agency in the form of innovative strategies of union renewal.

Ethnographic Depth: Participant Observation, its Opportunities and Challenges

Besides shedding light on the macro-level political economic and social institutional jungle within which unions move, the case study at hand involves taking a look at the actions and interactions unfolding at the "front line", i.e. in the union halls and on the construction sites themselves. This entails among other things looking at the formal and informal practices shaping the union, studying positive as well as negative interactions between union organizers and workers on the sites as well as during meetings and rallies, and also illuminating the massive and complex process of conceptualizing, planning and mobilizing before, during and after industrial action. All

of these phenomena are ultimately based upon deep and entangled interactions between various social actors, ones often pursuing different goals and interests.

It goes without saying that such an endeavor demands us to approach the question of research methods both seriously and reflectively. As a social anthropologist, I have been trained to embrace the wide variety of methods provided by and continuously developed in the social sciences as a virtue, not a competition. Yet while supported by other quantitative and qualitative perspectives in certain aspects, the method most closely associated with social anthropology and ethnography is indeed the method that will prove most useful in the case study at hand: participant observation[3].

By taking this "royal path of doing anthropology" (Bollig and Finke 2014: 43f.), we are able to immerse ourselves in the complex world we study. "Being ethnographic" (Madden 2010) as a participant observer enables us to unearth and collect masses of data otherwise unavailable and to gain a potentially deep *emic*, i.e. inside, perspective. Thus, while we could and should measure the statistical intensity of strikes in the Swiss construction industry over the past decade, this would tell us little of the social interactions, tension and pressure of what actually goes on before, during and after such forms of contentious collective action. And while it may make sense to interview organizers and workers about their vast treasury of thoughts and experiences, an approach limited to interviews will miss key interactions or moments which for them may seem irrelevant or simply so glaringly obvious that they are not worth mentioning. Simply, yet decisively put, what participant observation allows us to do is to collect dynamic *Handlungsdaten*, or in other words not only static data on what people say they do or what has been recorded on a statistical level, but empirical data on what people actually do and how they interact with other social actors and institutions in pursuit of their interests, beliefs, hopes and dreams.

[3] While participant observation represents the main key of this ethnographic study of organized labor in a changing labor world, it was supplemented by other methods as well. Besides "extending" our study to "historical research" (Burawoy 2009: 65), I have also used economic and statistical data collected and published by the Swiss Department of Statistics, the State Secretariat for Economic Affairs and the Swiss Construction Employers Association. I was further able to draw upon a daily compilation of all Swiss newspaper articles containing the word Unia and construction, a welcome instrument provided by an external media monitoring firm on behalf of the union.

Long looked down upon as supposedly unscientific by the defenders of a strict sense of positivism on the one hand and on the other criticized as representing a manipulative power instrument by intellectuals associated with the postmodernist tradition, the ethnographic method of participant observation is in fact now more popular than ever. As a result, it is no longer exclusively used in more classic anthropological settings such as the hills of Papa New Guinea, but has become understood as just as applicable to "one's own social surroundings too" (Atkinson and Hammersley 1994: 250), whether that is to study labor unions or even the "cockpits of capitalism" in the Swiss banking world (Leins 2015).

The ethnographic method of participant observation has also long transcended the otherwise often cemented boundaries of the social sciences, being both experimented with and even further developed in a number of other disciplines of the wider social sciences (Atkinson and Hammersley 1994; Burawoy 2009). While both the accusations arising from the positivist camp (as unscientific) as well as those coming from the postmodern corner (as manipulative) are under circumstances valid and should be taken into consideration as legitimate warnings, it is the scientific duty and responsibility of the ethnographer to pursue a participant observation that is neither simply "anecdotal" nor lacking the "scientific description first outlined by Malinowski" (Durrenberger 2007: 81), but one that indeed aims to amass empirical data, which can then be analyzed with the goal of furthering the social sciences in general.

While participant observation can be a useful tool in a number of fields, the strengths of such long term engagement with both individuals as well as organizations and communities and the "value of little formalized open-ended discussions" (Bollig and Finke 2014: 41) are especially relevant in the more sensitive fields of conflict and shifting power relations. It goes without saying that in a field where workers have been threatened and even fired for taking part in union activities, giving a formal interview or filling out a written survey on precisely that subject, namely their individual and collective union activism, is far from given. Besides making it more difficult to gain access to data, exclusive reliance on interviews and surveys also bears the very real risk of collecting distorted data as one might only reach a particular group, either those not at risk of employer repression or those with nothing to lose. The benefits of participant observation versus simple interviews or surveys

are, however, just as much if not even perhaps more prevalent when it comes to the fulltime union staff and organizers themselves.

If we heed Burawoy's observation that the most seismic and difficult interventions during anthropological fieldwork are the researcher's entry into and departure from the field (1998: 17), then this case study starts from a privileged position. As acknowledged above, while I write this thesis from a clear and critical anthropological position, I have been an active union member and union organizer for a number of years now. That being said, ethnographic research has also been a steady companion on this journey. Having gained my organizing experiences and know-how first as a volunteer activist and then as a full-time organizer in a local region of the union, I have conducted ethnographic research ever since (Kelley 2012; 2014a; 2014b; 2017). Since 2014, coinciding with the start of my doctoral research, I have been part-time employed in Unia's national construction department. This department coordinates the union's activities in construction and is responsible for developing its national strategy in the main construction trades as well as organizing all national activities. It furthermore cooperates closely with the local regional units of the union, which are tasked with executing the national strategy.

My work in the union during my research period primarily revolved around helping to coordinate and implement the 2015 campaign at the heart of this ethnography. This included taking an active role in national strategy discussions, conducting the internal communication thereof, writing and designing flyers and planning and coordinating mass events including a demonstration of 15'000 construction workers in June and three "protest days" in November involving a total of 10'000 construction workers laying down their tools. Furthermore, a key part of my job was to liaison with those who actually carried out the work *auf dem Terrain* ("on the ground"), namely the staff organizing teams and the worker activists in the local regions themselves. This meant among other things discussing the implementation of the national strategy in the regions with both organizing staff and worker activists, conducting training sessions on communications skills and building worker committees, and together with the local organizers planning assemblies, rallies and other activities.

In the second half of 2015, I also spent three days a week embedded in the construction organizing team of the local regional unit "Mittelland"[4]. Besides accompanying local construction organizers on their daily rounds on the sites, I also helped organize and carry out rallies, assemblies and protest actions. Unia is made up of 14 local regions, which are responsible for the union work "on the frontline" in their geographical area: organizing new workers, recruiting and training activists, providing services and carrying out local as well as national campaigns on a local level. Each region has a relatively high amount of autonomy, both concerning what they do and how they do it.

The local region I spent time in, region Mittelland, is a region that has made the strategic decision to focus a large part of its activities on the construction sector. After colliding head on with the challenges facing the union in the last campaign in 2011, in particular those arising from the growing precarization of labor described above, this particular region invested time and resources aimed at developing a wide range of innovative and systematic tactics and techniques for better recruiting and mobilizing workers. Their successes at worker turnouts during mobilizations have spoken for themselves. Thus, the chance to participate at the frontline of their activities, in day to day interactions with the various players of the construction world, was a rare opportunity – both from a union perspective as well as that of the anthropologist. Furthermore, given that the region in question was a metropolitan center with hundreds of dense and large construction sites and thousands of workers, the fragmentation of labor arising from new forms of precarious employment was particularly acute. Besides that, this urban center also brought together a wide number of nationalities and thus languages. Since not even all of the workers understood each other, the development and testing of innovative mobilizing strategies was of particular relevance in this region.

So, while I have included data from all aspects of my position within the union, the majority of ethnographic data concerning mobilizing efforts on the frontline was collected in region Mittelland, which must be kept in mind when analyzing our data. That being said, given the particular difficulties in this metropolitan center, stemming

[4] „Mittelland" is a pseudonym I will use throughout this ethnography. In social anthropology, there is a long-held tradition of anonymity for certain places and social actors. This discretion serves on the one hand to allow informants to be as open and honest as possible and on the other hand emphasizes the priority of discussing the empirical data collected as expressions of underlying mechanisms and patterns of social processes.

from an especially high degree of precarious labor fragmentation as well as linguistic heterogeneity, yet also the region's relative success in organizing and mobilizing, this is not only an ideal local case study, but the region's systematic approach has in parts also been adopted by a number of other union regions as well.

This diversified bundle of activities and interactions both on a coordinative national level as well as on a more frontline local level provided me with a rare and comprehensive perspective of the organizational and social processes unfolding within as well as around the union during its campaign of 2015. Besides simply providing optimal access to the field of study, however, this setting of being a recognized and active member of the community further provided me with three interlinked ethnographic opportunities.

First of all, as hinted at above in reference to Burawoy (1998: 17), my position in the union allowed me to circumvent the sometimes dramatic, difficult and methodologically challenging phases of entry to and departure from the field. As both ruptures can have strong effects on the research process itself, the liquefying of those often quaky moments is a priceless asset. The second opportunity, and directly connected to the first, touches upon questions of identity and the relationship between researcher and informants. While it was open and common knowledge that I was simultaneously conducting research as a social anthropologist, my primary identity within the union was and is clearly shaped as that of an organizer and only on a secondary level as that of a researcher. The impact of this cognitive distinction was fundamental as social interactions were mutually carried out and expressed in a very different, less targeted way and are substantially more relaxed than otherwise might have been. Third of all, the large catalogue of my tasks on both a national as well as local level provided me with almost unlimited access to social scientific data that would otherwise simply not have been accessible.

That being said, such opportunities rarely come free and this grand strength is indeed at the same time our potential Achilles' heel. While I am far from the first anthropologist to be closely connected to his or her subject of study, especially when it comes to the ethnographic study of labor unions (Brodkin 1988; Burton 1991; Lopez 2004; Durrenberger and Erem 2005), there is no point in denying that such a dual role at best bears the risk of getting too "close as to miss the wood for the trees" (Bate 1997: 1151) and at worst one compromising a critical, scientific stance in

general. While generally agreeing with Durrenberger that “the question of investigator objectivity arises only when scientific research lends credence to subordinate rather than more powerful groups“ (2007: 74), I am equally convinced that each researcher must nonetheless actively and critically reflect and remain constantly aware of the ways and the degree to which his or her study is shaped by such a hybrid role.

For just as research conditions in general shape the ethnographies of all participant observers, if such a dual role is not reflected upon, it will not only influence the lens through which we view our empirical findings, but perhaps even the questions asked in the first place. At the end of the day, even if a researcher may openly and legitimately be connected to the topic or organization of research, neither science, the scientist, nor the organization of study is served by trading critical research and perhaps uneasy questions and answers for the comfortable, yet foggy or even false realm of ideology.

That being said, we must treat this as what it is: a possible, potential trap of which we need to be aware and not a wounded Titanic destined to sink. It is in this sense that I am convinced, and similar research supports this (Brodkin 1988; Burton 1991; Lopez 2004; Durrenberger 2007), that the above noted opportunities and advantages can be cultivated and the potential drawbacks held at bay given that the researcher involved takes the time, effort and in some cases maybe even the courage to critically reflect his or her role.

Besides an intense and critical process of reflection, a further instrument that will help us when it comes to keeping ourselves on the ethnographic road of science is by “rooting ourselves in theory that guides our dialogue with participants.“ (Burawoy 1998: 5). This “rationality of theory“ (Polanyi in Burawoy 1998: 5) is at the heart of what Burawoy calls “a reflexive model of science”, which “embraces not detachment but engagement as the road to knowledge“ (1998: 5). It is in this sense that by discarding both postmodernist nihilism and ultra-positivist naiveté, the industrial ethnographer Burawoy asserts that “Objectivity is not measured by procedures that assure an accurate mapping of the world but by the growth of knowledge […]“ (1998: 5). Thus, this thesis is built on a strong and applicable theoretical pillar, which will be described in the following chapter.

So, instead of seeking to contain the "ethnographic condition of intense involvement, we seek to turn it to our advantage" (Burawoy 1998: 5) – while simultaneously remaining aware, critical and reflective of the risks involved. As to the morally laden question as to whether science should in fact even have such fluid borders to the political sphere or even see itself as being (potentially) in the service of one or the other political actor, the issue is hardly a new one (Deslippe et al. (eds.) 2016). It has indeed been discussed both in the more positivist-oriented camp, seeking to isolate science from politics completely, as well as in the meanwhile established tradition of applied anthropology and public sociology, calling for a more interventionist stance.

Positioning himself along the lines of the latter and unveiling the social sciences, or any sciences for that matter, as "a field of power", Burawoy used his 2004 presidential address of the American Sociological Association to explicitly propose that:

> *If the standpoint of economics is the market and its expansion, and the standpoint of political science is the state and the guarantee of political stability, then the standpoint of sociology is civil society and the defense of the social. In times of market tyranny and state despotism, sociology—and in particular its public face—defends the interests of humanity.* (2005b: 24, italics in original)

As can be imagined, when it comes to the growing number of anthropologists studying labor unions, there is a high amount of passion and participation involved. In concluding her own call for a labor anthropology willing to debate how anthropological research might come to be relevant to organized labor, anthropologist Sharryn Kasmir goes so far as to state that:

> At a time when the US government is recruiting anthropologists to participate in Human Terrain Systems to help plot military practice, it is not too partisan to call on anthropologists studying kinship, religion, gender, racial formation, indigenity, identity, etc., in many parts of the world to make our work relevant to and part of an emerging international labor movement. (2009: 76)

To sum up, while it is unnecessary and would even be delusional to ignore the various relationships between ethnography and practice, we must at the end of the day equally not forget that the primary goal of social scientific research is one of the "production of knowledge" (Atkinson and Hammersley 1994: 254). The main goal at hand is thus one of furthering social scientific knowledge on the subject of organized

labor and not primarily one of directly enhancing the success of the latter. This is, obviously, not due to a lack of sympathy therefor, but simply because the questions at hand as well as the structure and character of the thesis as a whole are in this case more tailored to the academic needs of science and less to the perhaps related, yet separate needs of the labor movement. That being stated, if this thesis does, in the sense of a "public" sociology or anthropology, unleash a fruitful debate within the organization itself and plays a role in "[bolstering] the organs of civil society" (Burawoy 2005a: 319), then that would, while not being an explicit goal in itself, no doubt represent a welcome concomitant.

Revitalizing Organized Labor: Literary Overview

To conclude this introductory chapter, I will now provide a brief overview of existing studies and literature on the subject of organized labor in a changing political economic world. Due to the vast amount of literature on the more general topic of unions themselves, this review focuses on the currently dominant studies of *labor revitalization* and *labor renewal*, to which this thesis counts itself.

Social scientific studies of organized labor in the capitalist economy are far from a novel undertaking. Research projects on unions are nothing new and stretch far back to the beginning of these organizations as a recognized player in industrial relations as well as to the start of social scientific studies on industrial topics in general. That being said and reflecting the relatively strong position of trade unions following the collapse of fascism and their institutionalized position in post-war capitalism, union studies for long focused on the more representative role of unions as agents of collective bargaining and grievance management as well as their supposedly stabilizing function in the capitalist economy. In other words, negotiations on company and industry level as well as unions' influence on wider legislature and the latter's effects on the economy were the questions of the day (Slichter et al. 1960). As such, these more traditional industrial relations studies had a strong functionalist aspect to them.

Needless to say, the political economic upheavals in the 1970s and 1980s and the drastic if not existential effects those had on industrial relations, namely the gradual erosion of the postwar institutions of so-called welfare capitalism, exposed the fundamental weaknesses of this genre of industrial relations studies. Precisely because of their rather ahistorical, functionalist approach, these studies told us lots

about how “the system” works in such times of stability, yet revealed little about “what to do when the system approaches collapse“ (Turner 2004: 3). Furthermore, and inseparable from this previous point, these studies remarkably enough more or less completely blended out questions of power (Kelly 1998: 9). This is, however, not necessarily surprising given the functionalist outlook of these scholars who focused more on what makes a supposedly homogeneous system as a whole function and less on the different social actors involved with their often opposing interests and power asymmetries.

While these political economic changes of the times indeed discredited the functionalist approach of classic industrial relations studies and their ahistorical perspective towards trade unions, it did not at first lead to more fruitful studies of labor strategies. For the large part, the bleak reality of trade unions on the defensive either led many social scientists to generally lose interest in questions of organized labor or to assume and then reproduce an often rather deterministic discourse of organized labor’s demise (Disney 1990). Even in countries such as Germany, whose system of industrial relations still see unions carry a substantial amount of weight, questions of a “capitalism without trade unions?“ (Müller-Jentsch 2006), which in itself would have provoked a scandal in the era of Fordist welfare-state-capitalism, are indeed cautiously discussed.

As noted by Turner, while the “transformation literature of the 1980s and 1990s” made welcome contributions to the subject matter by analyzing the erosion of organized labor, it neglected to acknowledge a strategic choice or agency of the unions themselves (2004: 3). Thus, according to this stance, unions must either surrender to being “overwhelmed by opposing forces […]” or they can “adapt – to the institutions or the transformation”, yet their agency for developing innovative strategies to themselves revitalize as organizations and shift existing power relations is neglected (ibid). So, while the functionalist studies of old told us there was nothing to worry about, the literature produced directly thereafter, during the hegemonialization of neoliberalism, took on a “crisis-paradigm“ (Urban 2008: 9) and seemed to suggest inevitable defeat.

Yet just as the two paradigms above were significantly shaped by the empirical realities and changes surrounding them, the energizing labor renewal efforts arising

from the crisis of labor equally sent a wave of revitalization not only through the movements they were changing, but just as much through the social sciences studying these organizations. This upheaval within organized labor indeed shifted the dominant discourse of union research away from functionalist institutional arrangements as well as deterministic “crisis-paradigms“ (Urban 2008: 9) and towards the idea of studying innovative tactics, strategies and organizational shifts aimed at activating and empowering workers and potentially leading to a “trade union comeback“ (Schmalz and Dörre (eds.) 2013). Thus began the dawn of *labor revitalization studies* (Frege and Kelly 2004).

Flowing from a key assumption of strategic choice, one of the main findings in these studies is that “union tactics matter“ (Bronfenbrenner and Juravich 1995). Or in other words, while superficial and non-personal tactics such as mass mailings of union cards and flyers may have worked in the heyday of welfare capitalism, today’s rougher labor world calls for a “rank-and-file intensive” grassroots approach where “movement unionists engage workers face to face” on the one hand and where industrial action goes beyond the traditional strike to include public protests and disruptive action on the other (Lopez 2004: 10). While the latter not only raises pressure upon employers to give concessions, it can also “build workers’ confidence and sense of collective power“ (ibid). Besides the development of such tactical innovations, labor revitalization scholars have also emphasized the decisiveness of going beyond simple bread-and-butter issues and communicating a larger vision of social justice (Bronfenbrenner et al. (eds.) 1998; Lopez 2004).

Not surprisingly, yet an important factor thereof, many of the scholars involved in these studies, while being experienced academics, had themselves previously been (or still are) active in the labor movement, either as activists or even once as fulltime staff (Bronfenbrenner et al. (eds.) 1998; Durrenberger and Erem 2005; Hälker and Vellay (eds.) 2006; Bremme et al. 2007 (ed.); Oesch 2011; Dörre and Schmalz 2013; Nachtwey and Wolf 2013; Scholz 2013; McAlevey 2016). Others had not necessarily been active per se, yet were explicit sympathizers and embraced a kind of public sociology seeking to not only study the labor world in question, but to also carry out a debate with those seeking to change it (Turner and Hurd 2001; Milkman and Voss 2004). In fact, some have even consciously called for a practice-oriented research approach in the spirit of Boltanski and Chiapello (2003). In this sense, the

development of social critique in the social sciences goes hand in hand with the practical rebuilding of the labor movement itself, while each clearly and necessarily maintain their respective autonomy in order to breath and prosper (Brinkmann et al. 2008; Schmalz and Dörre 2013).

The empirical research carried out by these labor revitalization studies has involved a wide variety of social scientific methods, ranging from quantitative statistical data analyzing the union's strategic concepts in relation to their success rates (Bronfenbrenner et al. (eds.) 1998), yet also to more qualitative approaches consisting of in-depth interviews with union organizers and activists (Schmalz and Dörre (eds.) 2013). Every now and then participant observation will also be explicitly noted as a research method (Nachtwey and Wolf 2013).

Like the initial changes occurring in the labor movement, the roots of these labor revitalization studies are to be found in the United States. In fact, sociologists and political scientists closely followed the shifts from bureaucratic service unionism to a more social-movement-oriented approach from the start (Brodkin 1988; Bronfenbrenner 1993; Bronfenbrenner et al. 1998; Voss and Sherman 2000; Turner and Hurd 2001). And like the above noted spread of innovative organizing strategies from there to other parts of the West, social scientific interest spread along with it. As a result, some of the scholars most actively and fruitfully debating these questions today are centered around the Friederich-Schiller-University in Jena, Germany. Besides conducting empirical research into new union strategies and organizational development, a further commendable strength of the latter's approach is the presence of a fruitful dialectic relationship between research and theory development. While theoretical influences range from more classic thinkers such as Karl Marx, Max Weber, Rosa Luxemburg and Karl Polanyi, they also extend to Pierre Bourdieu as well as to analytical Marxists such as Erik O. Wright and Beverly Silver. It is here that the so-called *Jena Power Resources Approach* was developed, which will be thoroughly discussed in chapter two.

Yet despite the analytically sharp elucidations of many of these labor revitalization studies and some no doubt very decisive findings, what often seems to go missing is a "thick description" (Geertz 1973) and analysis of the formal and informal, collective and individual processes on the ground (with some noteworthy exceptions such as

Brodkin 1988; Lopez 2004; Ariovich 2010). In other words, there is a lot of “before” and “after”, depicting both organizational and institutional changes as well as the campaign’s achievements, yet often only a limited picture of what actually occurs on the road getting there. This is not to suggest that the actors themselves are not given a voice. Indeed, interviews play an important role in a number of these studies. However, only a modest number of case studies have used participant observation to accompany workers and organizers on their actual day to day activities. This is particularly important given that, as Lopez points out, “Social movement unionism is not simply a laundry list of tactics, it is a process of change within the labor movement itself“ (2004: 12). As such, next to more concept- and strategy-based studies, in-depth ethnographies depicting and explaining the numerous social phenomena unfolding in these processes are essential.

This is where anthropology has stepped on to the stage. The greater concept of labor itself has long enjoyed an important place in anthropological thought and countless ethnographies have been written from a variety of theoretical and empirical perspectives on the subject. One does not have to be a Marxist to realize that “Labor is what humans do, across time and across space.“ (Malinowski in Durrenberger and Marti 2006: 1). Thus, labor is treated as a “window for understanding all of human behavior, thought, and organization from the most macro-level of a global political economy to the most micro-level of the individual worker […].“ (ibid). That being said, the collective organization of labor has, regretfully, long rested at the peripheries of the discipline. While trade unions have indeed surfaced every now and then as a supporting actor, there has been far too little research conducted by anthropologists specifically focusing on trade unions themselves, let alone on ones operating “at home” in the metropolises of capitalism.

However, while taking slightly longer than the traditionally closer discipline of industrial sociology, around the turn of the millennium a growing number of anthropologists have begun to discover the great ethnographic potential of investigating the transformative changes unfolding in organizations previously perceived by many anthropologists to be little more than bureaucratic machines. Again initiated in the United States, this “anthropology of organized labor“ (Durrenberger 2007) employs ethnographic methods, in particular long-term participant observation, in order to assemble a deep, fine-grained and holistic picture

of the complex processes unfolding in the realm of renewing trade unions in a globally changing capitalism. By focusing not only on the beginnings and ends, successes and failures, but on the everyday process itself of organizing and activating workers to take part in collective action, this anthropological approach pays heed to the changing thoughts and concrete actions of the variety of actors involved.

So, while some fine ethnographies of organized labor had previously been produced outside of the discipline (Brodkin 1988; Fantasia 1988; Lopez 2004; Ariovich 2010), this budding anthropology of organized labor has produced a growingly cohesive approach and network. Besides a growing number of ethnographic case studies (Durrenberger and Erem 2005; Zlolniski 2010), two noteworthy readers on the subject played an important role in consolidating the study of labor unions as a subfield of social anthropology: *The Anthropology of Labor Unions*, edited by E. Paul Durrenberger and Karaleah Reichart (2010) as well as Sharryn Kasmir and August Carbonella's *Blood and Fire. Toward a Global Anthropology of Labor*. More recently, another collection edited by Durrenberger, *Uncertain Times. Anthropological Appraoches to Labor in a Neoliberal World* (2017), has also been published including my own contribution (Kelley 2017) on aspects discussed more thoroughly in the thesis at hand.

And what's in it for the wider discipline of anthropology? As Durrenberger points out, trade unions, as simultaneously social, political, cultural and economic phenomena, represent a unique and fruitful field within which anthropologists may carry out research on subjects that are of great meaning to the entire discipline (2007: 75). What's more, and counting for the social sciences in general, empirical research on this many-faced phenomenon provides us with a promising observation point from which to reflect upon and further develop existing theoretical bodies, especially those dealing with labor, collective action, political economy and the shaping of social institutions through shifting power asymmetries and social conflict.

It is to this meanwhile established field of labor revitalization studies and a still blossoming anthropology of organized labor that this doctoral thesis aims to contribute. On the one hand, this ethnography of organized construction workers will represent a unique case study of a social group that is highly organized and has over time helped shape a dense jungle of social institutions, yet finds itself in a changing

political economy rocking the labor world within which it lives, breathes and acts. On the other hand, by studying the individual and collective agency of workers and union organizers and activists as well as embedding them in the political economic and institutional environment in which they move, we are equally provided with an empirical platform upon which to discuss a broad range of theoretical debates. As noted above, such a holistic fusion of an ethnographic study of changing labor and changing organized labor in a single ethnography is something that has so far only rarely been done. In this sense, I hope to contribute to filling this gap by offering just that.

2. Thinking and Rethinking Theory: Assembling our Toolbox

As a contribution to labor revitalization studies and a budding anthropology of labor, the thesis at hand is an ethnography of organized labor seeking to renew itself in a changing and more hostile political economic environment and the complex interdependencies and fluid dynamics between the two. It goes without saying that the scientific exploration of this array of social phenomena is far from an easy or clear-cut task. Thus, by preparing an adequate methodological as well as theoretical framework, the present chapter serves as preparation for the journey that lies ahead.

This chapter begins by establishing the general epistemological approach underlying the study as a whole. While theory may guide us on our travels, methodology is the base of the former, laying a sturdy groundwork upon which theory can stand. When studying social upheaval and change, no methodological stance captures the tension between empirical data and theory better than Michael Burawoy's thoughts on the *extended case method*. Not only emphasizing the value of ethnographic case studies, Burawoy equally points to the decisiveness of bringing their results into systematic discussion with theory in order to achieve the ultimate goal: building social scientific knowledge.

After arming ourselves with the guiding thoughts provided by Burawoy's methodological approach, I will proceed to assemble the particular theoretical elements that will prove useful in our own research endeavor. Instead of rigidly clinging to one particular theoretical strand, I will assemble a wider theoretical toolbox as an explanatory model for the case study at hand. This does not and cannot mean that all assumptions of our chosen theories are arbitrarily thrown into one heap, but that the relevant elements of each are considered and, if proven useful, subsequently applied.

As this study focuses on organized labor in a field of dynamic capitalism "on the move" (Harvey 2010: 12), it is useful to begin with the political economy of Marxist theory. Considering that organized labor can only be understood from a viewpoint taking the functioning of the wider capitalist mode of production into its scope, our short overview of Marxist analysis is a necessary launch pad for both the rest of our theoretical body as well as for our empirical data later on. That being said, it is of no

secret that more classical Marxism paid little attention to the agency of acting collectives, let alone individuals. It is for this that we will then turn to the complex and further developed thoughts of later Marxists, especially those taking into account this missing individual agency and collective action: Analytical Marxism. In order to better explain their own logics and strengths on the one hand, yet also due to the direct relevance to the subject matter at hand, the latter's thoughts are discussed and contrasted with the widely-debated assumptions of Mancur Olson concerning collective action.

Moving on, if one of the key aims of this thesis is to study how unions shift power relations in pursuit of their collective interests, it seems only sensible to widen our theoretical framework to include an approach helping us to understand not only the institutional environment in which this is done, but also the institutions within which any bargaining results would be consolidated. This, as well as some of the other missing links in Marxist theory, can be found in Jack Knight's distributive-approach to institutionalist theory. It is Knight himself who proclaims that his approach may and should be used as the missing micro-foundations for the macro-level accounts of Marxist theory (1992: 125; 211). In this sense, Knight invites us to consider social institutions as originating as a by-product of social conflict between various self-interested social actors with different power asymmetries.

Finally, the last layer of our theoretical toolbox will be added by integrating the thoughts of the Jena Power Approach, specifically developed to study the various, yet simultaneously interlinked elements of trade union renewal from a perspective of changing power relations. By differentiating, yet simultaneously highlighting the dynamic interactions between a standing pyramid of associational, structural, institutional and societal power resources, this approach provides us with a highly applicable theoretical instrument empowering us to dissect the various aspects and possibilities of union power. And while differentiating between the diverse power resources available, the model emphasizes the particular importance of associational power, i.e. the power stemming from the collective agency of organized workers. The Jena approach is, in fact, a particularly fitting end puzzle piece. For while it represents a distinct approach in itself, it is also one built upon thoughts reaching back to the other theories discussed in this thesis, in particular the thoughts of Erik Olin Wright, a leading Analytical Marxist.

In the end, we will have hopefully assembled a multifunctional, yet coherent theoretical toolbox based on the pragmatic, yet deeply reflected principles of Bollig and Finke's *theory networks* (2014), a toolbox enabling us to not only understand the union as a strategic actor, but also the political economic and institutional environment within which it moves.

Entwining Data and Theory: the Extended Case Method

When searching for the intellectual origins of the extended case method, which will represent our broader methodological approach as it has already in previously conducted research (Kelley 2012), we are inevitably confronted with a far greater piece of anthropology's own history and disciplinary development. In order to understand not only the history of said approach, but also what continues to remain in effect its essence and uniqueness, it helps us to look back at the context into which the extended case method was born. For like so many other scientific developments, this methodology was born out of the ashes of a crisis.

Social anthropology has for a long time had a virtuous and proud tradition of producing fine-grained, in-depth and detailed accounts of the communities they studied. This is, of course, one of the key strengths of the discipline. This tradition took a momentous leap when Polish-British anthropologist Bronislaw Malinowski played an important role in equipping these studies with the demands of scientific standards. Yet while having long produced strikingly in-depth depictions of the fields they studied and despite Malinowski's scientific progress, three weaknesses hampered the discipline up until at least the mid-20th century.

First of all, despite or perhaps even as a result of their in-depth explorations, anthropological studies were for long generally carried out from a rather isolationist perspective. The different places and people studied were to a large extent perceived as isolated islands with no connections to the outside world, let alone with any interdependencies, cooperation or conflict. As such, these in-depth investigations tended to be conducted not in concert with the greater structures surrounding the place or subject matter at hand, but at the cost of ignoring them.

Second of all, theoretical approaches tended to be dominated by a relatively strong and harmony-based functionalist perspective. In this sense, anthropologists sought to locate structures, processes and mechanisms keeping society together as a

functioning whole. As a result, anthropologists often took a rather prescriptive approach, looking for what “natives ought to do” instead of what they actually did (Burawoy 2009: 22). Of course, as a further result thereof, antagonistic conflicts of interest between the different actors involved and their sometimes complex and contentious relations tended to be seen either as irrelevant or simply as temporary glitches in the system.

Thirdly, and directly connected to both of these previous points, power asymmetries or even power itself were duly ignored. For if the key function of all social phenomena is supposedly a stabilizing one, then power relations and power asymmetries between social actors are then, of course, of little relevance. And if the local system is inherently built and structured so as to function as an organic whole, then power relations embedded therein must either be seen as a stabilizing factor or simply not be taken into account, as this would not only upset the system, but also the theoretical approach thereto.

When the colonial world order vividly crumbled around and after the end of the Second World War, more and more anthropologists came to question the validity of such an isolationist and strictly functionalist view. One of the first steps in emancipating the discipline from the above weaknesses was articulated in a call for an “Anthropological-Turn to the Macro“ (Burawoy 1991: 276). Many of the scholars taking such an insurgent stance were those associated with South African-British anthropologist Max Gluckman’s *Manchester School*. Distancing themselves from the isolationist approaches that had long dominated the discipline, Gluckman and his colleagues began to see the communities they studied as embedded within the broader global context of the day as well as within the changing power relations this entailed. In other words, “Manchester anthropology began to restore African communities to their broader, world historical context.“ (Burawoy 2009: 22). In doing so, they not only departed from a more static, functionalist stance, but began to see the places, groups and social relations studied from a more processual perspective of being in a constant state of flux, development and upheaval.

In the development of his methodological approach, Gluckman first took an angle reminding us of what would later become known as the *interpretive case method*, searching for how a greater, structural macro-level exhibited itself in daily routines. Gluckman soon changed this approach, however, towards one using participant

observation to unveil how the micro-level of everyday life was itself shaped and conditioned by the greater external forces of the macro-level – and to a certain extent vice-versa (Burawoy 2009). He did so, however, by paying particular attention to the specific historical and regional contexts in which both levels unfold. Thus, the extended case method slowly came to be born. In the context of a falling colonial system and the simultaneous crafting of a new world order, this was indeed a rewarding venture from a social scientific perspective and equally pointed to the fact that social structures best reveal their inner logics when confronted with change and pressure (Burawoy 1998: 17; Burawoy 2009: 245ff.).

In a very different global political economic world as well as in a different intellectual one years later, industrial sociologist Michael Burawoy carried the extended case method "from Manchester to Berkeley" (Burawoy 2009: 1). Using and evolving the approach within case studies from the copper mines of Zambia (2009) to manufacturing plants in the Midwestern United States (1979), Burawoy rediscovered the extended case method and began to refine and enhance it. Starting with participant observation as the key to unearthing dynamic social processes and moving on to existing theory before bringing both dialectically together, Burawoy places his approach in a reflexive model of science. This model, suggests Burawoy, "valorizes intervention, process, structuration, and theory reconstruction" and must be seen as "the Siamese twin of positive science that proscribes reactivity, but upholds reliability, replicability, and representativeness." (Burawoy 1998: 4).

The principles of the extended case method are, according to Burawoy, "quite simple" (2009: 17). First of all, we start by immersing ourselves, as participant observers, within the fields we wish to study. We "[join] the participants in the rhythm of their life, in their space and their time." (Burawoy 2009: 17). We use not only our observations, but place these in dialogue with our own participation to gain access to data that would otherwise go unearthed. Thus, as a primary method of collecting data, Burawoy vigorously advocates the value of the ethnographic technique of in-depth and long-term participant observation.

The second principle flows from the literal extension of the first, namely that we do not simply dip our toes in the water to claim some symbolic presence or field credibility, but "[extend our] observations over time and space." (Burawoy 2009: 17). Through this long-term participant observation, we do justice to the aspiration of the

extended case method to unveil structures, social relations and the actors within them as processual. While there are hardly fixed guidelines for this, “it has to be long enough to discern the social processes that give integrity to the site” and allow ritual, yet also drama, struggle and contradictions to emerge (ibid).

The third principle requires us, as hinted above, to bring the empirical data gathered into dialogue with the structures of the macro-level. It is this approach that enables us to simultaneously “[avoid] the pitfalls of relativism and universalism“ (Burawoy 1991: 276). Like grounded theory, the extended case method begins with the assumption that it makes sense to start from the analytical categories of the micro- and macro-level and that there is a direct interplay between the two (Burawoy 1991). It does not blend together or blur the micro- and macro-levels, as the interpretive case method would propose. And it also abandons the ethno-methodological view denying the existence of a macro-level as a sensible analytical category. That being said, unlike grounded theory, the extended case method contextualizes the characteristics of social phenomena and their embeddedness in their very particular historical as well as the geographic and social-economic local context.

The fourth principal discussed leads us closer to the focus of this chapter, namely building a relationship between our empirical data and social scientific theory, thus ultimately contributing to the prime goal of “the extension of theory“ (Burawoy 2009: 17). For, although the importance of in-depth case studies cannot be overemphasized, “single case studies may provide very interesting results […]”, yet “they provide no measure of their generalizability.“ (Burawoy 1991: 272) when taken for themselves.

For Burawoy, theory takes on a many-faced role. First of all, it helps us to “keep ourselves steady“ (Burawoy 1998: 5) and acts as a kind of navigation system helping us to steer through the massive and sometimes choppy sea of data we encounter on our ethnographic odyssey. For given that long periods of in-depth participant observation can and will unearth massive pools of empirical data, theory can help us to make sense of these seemingly endless oceans of information. Furthermore, if we are to approach our empirical data as being embedded within greater and more global structures of political economy and power relations, theory also “permits us to identify relevant forces beyond our site.“ (Burawoy 2009: 17).

Second of all, and this lets us proceed to the extension of theory itself, theory takes the vital and overarching role of scientific guarantor in that the value of an ethnographic study does not remain confined to a simple exploration of the case study at hand, but is lifted into debate with other case studies. In other words, "Theory is the condensation of accumulated knowledge that joins sociologists to one another; it is what makes us a community of scientists. We are theory bound." (Burawoy 2009: 15).

In a similar sense, Bollig and Finke suggest that we perceive the generalizations constructed through theorizing:

> […] as a way of detecting causal linkages; one that at the same time gives attention to historical/regional particularities and processes, and also seriously addresses the epistemological challenges arising from the embeddedness of social science research in power relations, hegemonic ideologies and public discourses. (2014: 41)

Theory is thus the common language of science, allowing case studies to debate with one another and pay tribute to the ambitious task of furthering social scientific knowledge in general.

Once again in contrast to grounded theory, however, which seeks to build theory every time anew, Burawoy proposes to focus our efforts on improving existing theory by bringing our chosen theoretical school into debate with empirical data grounded in time and space:

> In this version of ethnography we don't deliver our minds from preconception but clarify and problematize them; we don't accumulate data day after day only finally to code it and thereby infer theory at the end, as though no one else had thought of these matters before, but we continually engage theory with data, and theory with other theories. (Burawoy 2009: 15)

So, in the sense that "Science offers no final truth, no certainties, but exists in a state of continual revision." (Burawoy 1998: 16), we seek to participate in that process of revision, rethinking and enhancement. According to Burawoy, this aspect of the approach is the decisive point setting it apart from others: "Here lies the secret of the extended case method – theory is not discovered but revised, not induced but improved, not deconstructed but reconstructed." (2009: 13).

Thus, while research guided by the extended case method indeed dedicates itself to the particular case study at hand, instead of making arbitrary comparisons across social situations and "abstracting from time and place" (Burawoy 1991: 280), it aims at producing generalizations through confirming, yet also contrasting or supplementing existing theory. It is in the latter sense that Burawoy refers to a "Kamikaze stance toward theory", a stance having the insight as well as courage to not only stand up for, but also challenge our own theoretical convictions when our empirical data calls for it (Burawoy 1998: 20).

The thoughts envisioned by Burawoy and described above will represent our methodological guidelines. This holistic, yet differentiated approach and its passionate will to bring single case studies into debate with the wider scientific community is invaluable. When it comes to our particular case, however, instead of clinging to one theoretical school as if "theoretical principles [were] competing and mutually exclusive" (Bollig and Finke 2014: 48), this thesis draws upon the rich variety of social scientific theories as a strength in the quest towards building adequate explanatory models. For, while perhaps seemingly specific, the subject at hand, organized labor in a changing political economy, touches upon a broad range of social scientific phenomena. From collective action to shifting power relations between labor and capital, from social institutions to upheavals in the process of production, the questions at hand scatter at the thought of being explicable through one single theoretical tradition.

While some might look down upon such an approach as arbitrary eclecticism, Bollig and Finke point out the fruitfulness of such a procedure. It is in this sense that we will, as described in the introduction to this chapter, construct a mosaic of theoretical elements that will not only guide us on our journey, but also enable us to enter into debate with the wider social scientific community as well. Thus, perceiving the theoretical arena as "an open space where ideas from different theoretical strands may be borrowed and combined in order to build up more elaborate and accurate models of social life" (Bollig and Finke 2014: 48), we aim to build a theoretical toolbox or *theory network* (ibid) made up of elements taken from different schools of thought.

The Marxist Approach to Political Economy

The thesis at hand deals with trade unions and how one in a particular setting is currently attempting to revitalize itself in order to regain power and better shape the

structures, wages and working conditions of its industry. We are thus confronted with the essential question: What exactly is trade unionism and on what political economic basis do these organizations exist? E. Paul Durrenberger, one of today's leading scholars carrying out anthropological research into labor unions, provides us with vital starting points through the following definition thereof:

> The chief goal of the union movement is to organize workers for concerted action in support of their interests to redress the power imbalance between those who provide labor and those who control the conditions of its use through their ownership or management of productive resources. Because workers and owners of capital do not share interests, this relationship is necessarily adversarial. (2007: 75)

The main value of this apt description lies in the fact that it encourages us to widen our view from one focusing solely on the organizations themselves to a more holistic perspective encompassing first of all the particular environment in which both workers and unions move, yet second of all the very economic premise, the system of wage labor, from which the concept of labor unions can even be imagined. We are thus urged to widen our horizon and begin by theorizing how economies in certain times and places are organized and in what way they function. We are led to address the relationships between the different social groups involved as well as to face questions of who owns or controls the *means of production*. In particular, such a perspective allows us to begin to understand the very foundations of how and under what circumstances subaltern groups can act out agency in defense of their collective interests. For unions are "whether they like it or not – class organizations" (Deppe 2012: 10).

It is of no surprise that when dealing with such questions we find ourselves knocking at the doors of the greater theoretical entity known as Marxism. While not presuming that Marxist theory has all the answers, as will become clearly evident, it is nonetheless a fitting starting point for understanding the above questions, which are of course embedded in the "enigma of capital" (Harvey 2011). That being said, as we are dealing with "an extremely rich and variegated intellectual tradition which [has] interacted with politics and political movements […]" throughout the last centuries (Gamble 1999: 3), it is neither my intention nor in the scope of this thesis to attempt to provide an even semi-complete picture of the theory or even to explore all of the important pillars thereof. I far more plan to use specific principal elements of Marxist

theory, in particular those concerning the political economic mechanisms behind the extraction of surplus value and how these lay the fundament for trade unionism, in order to elaborate on the necessity of a class analysis for the study of trade unions, as suggested above by Durrenberger (2007) as well as Deppe (2012).

A main starting point for us to begin to understand Marx's thoughts on class is provided by the meanwhile (in)famous assumption that "The history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggles." (1969). What Marx meant by this often misinterpreted conclusion is not that every occurrence in the history of mankind must be seen as class struggle in itself, but that the phenomenon of class is not simply a by-product of society, but the very structure upon which class societies themselves are based. As a result, the contradictions arising from the class-structure of society can be and often are a potentially important motor for social change. Neither Marx nor Engels invented the term *class* and this may explain the perhaps somewhat surprising fact that while both produced thousands of pages of complex analyses on the topic, they neglected to actually provide us with a precise definition thereof. Johnston and Dolowitz, however, summarize the Marxist concept of class as one seeking to capture the economic and social relationship between the different groups of human beings in a given society (1999: 134ff.). The axis of this relationship is the particular role each group plays in the economic process, specifically in the production of *surplus value* in that society.

According to Marx, class structure in capitalist society is primarily shaped by the relationship between two main classes: the proletarian working class and the capitalist owner-class. While the former is defined by having nothing but the sale of their labor power to ensure its income, the latter is in direct or indirect possession of the material means of production and thus in a position to profit from the labor of the former. Arising from these characteristics is the fact that, although the working class tends to represent the numerical majority of capitalist societies and the group whose labor power produces the wealth accumulated in capitalist society, the members of this class find themselves in an asymmetrical relationship tilted against their own material benefit.

For the working class is, in the terms of Marx (1990), free in a double sense: *free from* ownership of the means of production and *free to* offer their labor power for sale. So, while in the latter sense workers may be free of the shackles of slavery or

feudalism, thus allowing them to take up an available employment of their choice, they are in the first sense equally free of any means to independently produce and accumulate capital. As a result, workers – generally speaking – have nothing but their labor power to sell and are thus forced to enter into a contractual relationship of wage labor with the owners of the means of production.

Proceeding from this asymmetrical relationship, an inherent logic of exploitation comes to determine the wage-labor-system. For in order for the capitalist to actually make a profit at all, his (or her) workers must be paid less than the value of what their labor actually produces. Thus, the capitalist will extract a difference between the actual value produced by the worker and the latter's wages, known as *surplus value*.

As becomes evident, from a Marxist perspective part of the worker's labor is paid and another part is unpaid. What also becomes clear, especially when using the above variables, is that the more surplus value is extracted, the lower the wage of the worker. Or from the perspective of the capitalist employer, the lower the wages are, the higher is the amount of surplus value, i.e. profit, extracted. When additionally throwing the variable of working time into the equation, we can assume that:

> […] the limits of the working day being given, the maximum of profit corresponds to the physical minimum of wages; and that wages being given, the maximum of profit corresponds to such a prolongation of the working day as is compatible with the physical forces of the labourer. The maximum of profit is therefore limited by the physical minimum of wages and the physical maximum of the working day. (Marx 1969)

While the accumulation of surplus by dominant classes was and is not an exclusive feature of the capitalist mode of production, in capitalism the processes thereof are not only more complex, but also more concealed. For in contrast to explicitly forced labor (slave societies) or the direct seizure or forced levy of material goods (feudal societies), "a web of mystification is spun around this mode of production, hindering a clear understanding of its true nature." (Gurley 1987: 284). It now also becomes clear as to why Marx spoke of workers selling their *labor power* and not simply selling what they actually produce or even the total amount of labor actually rendered: "[…] wages are not what they appear to be -- namely, the *value*, or *price*, of *labor*—but only a masked form for the *value*, or *price*, of *labor power." (*Marx 1970, italics in original).

A further unique characteristic of capitalism is that since production is set in a market logic shaped by the pressures of competition (Mandel 2008: 52), the owner class does not simply spend the extracted surplus on spoils and leisure. Far more, in order to grow his or her profits and conquer the largest portion of the market as possible, the individual capitalist or company uses previously accumulated capital to invest and thereby produce more with a higher efficiently and if possible at lower costs than the competition. Thus, widening our scope from the isolated factory to the greater market, it becomes clear that "[u]nder free competition, the immanent laws of capitalist production confront the individual capitalist as a coercive force external to him." (Marx paraphrased in Harvey 2010: 146). As such, it becomes equally clear that the question of exploitation is not necessarily one of "good- or bad-hearted [capitalists]" (Harvey 2010: 146), but that the system itself draws individual capitalists and companies into an endless search for more surplus value in order to expand and survive the "coercive laws of competition" (Harvey 2010: 145ff.), which would otherwise hurl them from the market.

All this being said, the actual degree of surplus value extracted can and does vary – from geographical location to historical era, from individual position to company and economic sector. And while it is in the employer's material interest to maximize his profits by paying lower wages and prolonging the working day, it is in the worker's material interest to strive for higher wages and shorter working times. How wages are actually shaped, however, is determined by a wide number of factors and variables.

On the one hand, what we must remember is that for Marx, labor power is a commodity that is to be bought and sold like any other (1969). As such, its market price is to a certain extent determined by the simple logic of supply and demand. That being said, despite the general commodity character of labor power, there are indeed particular "features, which distinguish the value of the laboring power" from that of other commodities (ibid). These features revolve around two basic levels determining wages: the "physical" and the "historical or social" (ibid).

The first recognizes the fact that labor power's value is determined primarily by "the values of the necessaries required its maintenance and reproduction." (ibid). In other words, a worker's income can only be, generally speaking, so low as the minimum costs of his or her own physical existence and reproduction. Furthermore, despite the

length of a working day being rather flexible, it is nonetheless bound by an ultimate limit provided by the “physical force of the labouring man“ (ibid).

Built upon this first and minimum element of the individual worker being able “to perpetuate its physical existence“ (ibid) is the second feature of “historical or social” wage-limits, or, as the anthropologist Roseberry points out in a broader sense, “cultural“ (1997: 36). For in every country, according to Marx, the value of labor is shaped by a “traditional standard of life”, which has in its center “the satisfaction of certain wants springing from the social conditions in which people are placed and reared up.“ (Marx 1969). As such, labor power can be of a highly “variable magnitude”, even when the value of all other commodities remains constant (ibid).

However, when remembering that in the determination of the amount of surplus value extracted, “the more the one gets the less will the other get“ (ibid), we must *generally* assume that one of the two involved parties, employer and employee, profits at the direct cost of the other. Thus, slowly but surely maneuvering us onto the level of the collective pursuit of interests, which is the main topic of this thesis, Marx states that:

> The fixation of its actual degree [degree of exploitation, i.e. height of wages] is only settled by the continuous struggle between capital and labour, the capitalist constantly tending to reduce wages to their physical minimum, and to extend the working day to its physical maximum, while the working man constantly presses in the opposite direction. (Marx 1969)

Thus, “[t]he matter resolves itself into a question of the respective powers of the combatants.“ (ibid).

That being said, despite the fact that the political economic structuration of capitalist society sets the material interests of the two classes in an antagonistic relationship to one another, this by no means automatically leads to open, continuous class struggle. For this to occur, the working class must, according to Marx, develop itself from an objectively, analytically distinguishable *class-in-itself*, “formed by the objective conditions of collective, alienated labor” to a *class-for-itself*, “cognizant of its mutual interests, poised for solidaric action, and strengthened in this struggle by shared culture and ritual.“ (Kasmir 2005: 79). In other words, while economic conditions may have created a working class as an *objectively visible group*, the latter must transform itself into a *subjective force* by becoming increasingly aware of

its collective class interests while at the same time simultaneously realizing its own capability to organize and act in defense of those interests, i.e. a sense of both collective interests and collective agency.

While this step towards a conscious and active “class for itself” is, in the long term, seen as part of a far greater process of self-emancipation, in the end transcending capitalist boundaries (Smith 2011), it is in labor struggles within capitalism that “this mass becomes united, and constitutes itself as a class for itself.“ (Marx 1955). In this respect, trade unions, as the basic form of working class organization, provide in the eyes of Marx a primary vehicle for developing class consciousness and class agency.

The logic of trade union power is, in theory if not necessarily in practice, simple: “[…] workers combine in order to achieve equality of a sort with the capitalist in their contract concerning the sale of their labour.“ (Marx in Lapides (ed.) 1990: 89). For if we assume that the process of production and thus the accumulation of surplus value is indeed in the end dependent on the labor power of the working class majority, then this group is, by their structural position in the process of production, in a (potentially) powerful position. In order to wield this power, however, i.e. in order to collectively refuse their labor power in order to raise the latter’s price as well as to improve the conditions of its sale, the working class must organize. They must organize into associations generally known today as trade unions. These associations provide not only the parameter to act collectively, they also play a part in suppressing or neutralizing the competition between workers themselves. Hence, “the accidental immediate neediness of a labourer should not compel him to make do with a smaller wage than supply and demand has already established”, thus depressing “the value of labour-power in a particular area below its customary level.“ (Marx in Lapides (ed.) 1990: 89).

All this being said, both Marx and Engels were far from giving any homogeneous praise for trade unions, which they saw as “embodying a *combination* of struggle against the rule of capital with submission to its dictates.“ (Barker 2013: 52, italics in original). For, as we can see, the very core of trade unionism rests upon acting within the logic of the wage-system or more specifically upon negotiating the prices of working people’s labor-power within the capitalist mode of production. From this perspective, trade unions operating in a capitalist economy can at best be seen as

organizations “absorbing the risks stemming from the commodity character of labor power” and by doing so attempting to “de-commodify” human labor power (Sauer in Deppe 2012: 10f.). At worst, however, and with a slightly more polemic undertone, it can even be said that in a strict Marxist sense the *raison d’être* of trade unions is to more-or-less “negotiate the terms of exploitation“ (Smith 2011) of the working class.
Marx, in the end, arrives at the ambivalent conclusion that:

> Trades Unions work well as centers of resistance against the encroachments of capital. They fail partially from an injudicious use of their power. They fail generally from limiting themselves to a guerilla war against the effects of the existing system, instead of simultaneously trying to change it, instead of using their organized forces as a lever for the final emancipation of the working class that is to say the ultimate abolition of the wages system. (1969)

Sharpening Our Tools: Marxist Theory, Agency and Collective Action

The function of the above subsection has been to provide us with a first trail for the path we have chosen to travel upon, namely establishing a political economic analysis as a starting point for studying trade union renewal. We have thus constructed a material base as to why trade unions actually (can) work. Far from any moral or abstract pressure, we have seen that the production process in capitalism itself actually bestows its workers with a potentially high amount of structural power. That being said, what quickly becomes evident when looking at Marx’s work is that one vital perspective remains vividly missing. By rather clinically placing his focus on the underlying relations of production, which are no doubt important, Marx regretfully largely ignores the agency of the workers themselves, as well as that of employers for that matter, and both become “merely embodiments, personifications of [the relationship between] capital and wage-labour.“ (Marx 1959).
Thus, when analyzed within the context of the greater debate of structure versus human agency (Ortner 1984), a clear and dominant focus is placed upon the former. Referring to questions and restraints of human choice, individual and collective action and lack thereof, the latter debate circles around "the relationship(s) that obtain between human action, on the one hand, and some global entity which we may call “the system,” on the other. […] the impact of the system on practice, and the impact of practice on the system.“ (Ortner 1984: 148). And despite Marx’s well-known statement that “men make their own history, but they do not make it as they please; they do not make it under self-selected circumstances, but under circumstances

existing already […]“ (1999), his emphasis was clearly placed upon said circumstances – instead of upon those making “their own history”. Far more, when workers actually did make history, this was largely attributed to the question of “the readiness of society’s structural development rather than one of individual choice.“ (Tarrow 2011: 17).

This structural focus has, sometimes rightfully so, sometimes less so, led to vicious criticism of Marxist theory as being too deterministic; that social actors have no real part to play and no agency themselves. And indeed, even a deeper look at classical Marxism would reveal that despite offering solid analytical instruments for understanding the political economic base allowing for trade unionism in the wage-labor-system to work, Marx indeed gives us little in the way of instruments to analyze the precise micro-mechanisms “[drawing] individuals into collective action.“ (Tarrow 2011: 17).

This being said, to view the Marxist approach (or any theoretical body for that matter) as some holy grail that dare not be questioned not only violates general scientific standards, but also the very thoughts Marx himself promoted (Eagleton 2011). It is in this sense that our methodological guide, Michael Burawoy, very clearly embraces an approach to Marxism as a “living tradition that enjoys renewal and reconstruction as the world it describes and seeks to transform undergoes change.“ (Burawoy 2014: 35). We must thus, in his view, see and use Marxism as a “variegated theory”, constantly reshaping and enabling it to keep up with the changing times and places it describes (ibid).

The quest for a theoretical revitalization and expansion of Marxist theory is, however, far from homogeneous and has led to a number of different paths being paved. Erik Olin Wright even goes so far as to plead for a view of today’s Marxism not as one “unified theory with well-defined boundaries,” but more as “a family of theories united by a common terrain of debate questions“ (1994: 178). From Wright’s perspective, while there has always existed “a plurality of Marxisms”, the final decades of the 20th century produced a new “degree of theoretical and methodological heterogeneity“ (ibid).

While in some cases this urge to revitalize Marxist theory has taken a more postmodernist approach, often becoming absorbed and lost in semantic drills as an end to itself, it has also taken a direction aimed at incorporating concepts and micro-

mechanisms of individual and collective agency. Due to the essence of this thesis, the focus will be on the latter direction. Given the profound depth of the now extensive school of so-called “non-dogmatic Marxism“ (Roemer 1986a: 4), I will draw upon specific currents of this renewal which will later be of use to the particular research question at hand. Specifically speaking, I will turn to approaches that have attempted to fuse Marxist theory with other, more agency-oriented theoretical streams.

Paradoxically, elements from neoclassic economic theory play a central role therein. The goal of this perhaps curious alliance was and continues to be to enhance Marxist theory so as to widen its range of application to micro-level phenomena “on the shop floor“ (Burawoy 1979). For despite its subversive potential and active role in a countless number of social movements, it is the paradox contradiction of orthodox Marxist theory that it has itself paid surprisingly little attention to worker agency and “too often and too easily reduced wage laborers to objects of manipulation […]; to victims of the inexorable forces of capitalist accumulation […].“ (Burawoy 1979: 77).

One of the first and today still active proponents of such a turn-to-agency-Marxism is our above referred-to methodological guide, Michael Burawoy. While criticizing conservative industrial sociology for its presumption of the capitalist mode of production as inevitable, Burawoy nevertheless looks to certain elements thereof in order to help “[…] restore the subjective moment of labor, to challenge the idea of the subjectless subject, to stress the ubiquitous resistance of everyday life.“ (1979: 77). His explicit aim is to integrate certain elements of neoclassical industrial sociology into Marxist theory in order to dialectically “move beyond them” (1979: 4).

In his classic ethnography of American workers in an industrial factory, *Manufacturing Consent. Changes in the Labor Process Under Monopoly Capitalism* (1979), Burawoy examines the everyday struggles and more importantly the everyday consent between workers and management. Burawoy points out that in fact neither conflict nor consent between workers and management are primordially given. Far more, they are products of the particular organization of the labor process in its specific place and time as well as of the agency of both workers and management themselves.

In the factory studied by Burawoy, the particular organization of production allowed workers a limited, yet decisive amount of autonomy – which they gladly seized. This perceived option of choice saw workers spontaneously constitute and participate in "games" of their own making. In these, workers tried to "make out" and produce the most in the shortest amount of time. During his participant observation, Burawoy himself admits to being sucked into this game even after previously questioning its rationality. He comes to the conclusion that it in the end, the games arising from this consensus-oriented organization of work simultaneously guarantee as well as additionally obscure the extraction of a higher amount of surplus labor. Yet under the circumstances given, it nonetheless becomes "rational" for the worker to participate. In this sense, partially reflected later on in Adam Przeworski's work (1986), class interests and rationality are also not seen as given, but as dynamically born out of a class's particular place in a particular historical stage of capitalism.

Individual agency being emphasized, however, Burawoy in no way seeks to dismiss the macro-level of structures and institutions. For the organization of the labor process described above is not simply an abstract product of some creative manager's good ideas, but (as the title of the book suggests) a direct product of monopoly capitalist development on the one hand and collective class struggle by organized labor on the other, both having reached unforeseen peaks in the postwar-era. It is these two contradicting forces which are not only driving motors of capitalist development, but also ones wielding a significant effect on the shop floor. The dialectic mix between the two made it on the one hand *economically possible* for company management to grant certain concessions and on the other hand *politically sensible* to introduce systems based more on Gramscian hegemony than on direct repression and confrontation.

While Burawoy's study is embedded in a direct critique of Marx, he emphasizes that his work is not an exercise in "neo-marxism" (Burawoy 1996: 78). And despite being influenced by Foucault's microphysics of power, he chose not to "follow him into poststructuralist nihilism" (ibid). In fact, Burawoy suggests that while the previously described book starts with a critique of Marx, in the end he returns, using precisely the tools of Marxism, to Marx's original interest in the organization of the labor process (1979: xii). In the same spirit, Burawoy elsewhere paraphrases Georg Lukás, who boldly stated that "even if all of Marx's individual theses were disproven, one

would not have to renounce Marxism for a single moment. The validity of Marxism lies not in this or that thesis but in its "method."„ (Burawoy 1996: 97).

While Burawoy's particular research subject is different than our own, he does point us in the direction we need to travel. He skillfully shows that the tools of Marxist theory can and should continue to represent a main starting point when explaining the ambiguous and many-faced aspects of class, class consciousness and (un)organized labor in capitalism. What he also points out, however, is that while Marxists have long excelled at producing studies of power harnessed in society's structural settings, a fatal weakness has been to neglect the "subjective moment of labor" (1979: 77). It is thus, in Burawoy's view, the duty of the ethnographer to continue to develop and ally the original concept with other theoretical work so that it can continue to be successfully employed in social scientific research.

By shifting our focus to include a greater emphasis on both individual and collective agency, the brief description above of Burawoy's classic ethnography allows us to now move on to a related school of thought heading in a similar direction: *Analytical Marxism*. Like Burawoy, with whom these scholars have directly collaborated, they also perceive a necessity for a renewal of Marxist theory in dialogue with other models. In doing so, however, they go much further and with a significantly higher degree of abstraction than the former. This group has, in fact, radically re-structured Marx's original work to an extent that they themselves question if it indeed should continue to be categorized as "Marxist" (Roemer 1986a: 4). While undoubtedly a polarizing example, and by no means one without weaknesses, it is also an approach displaying the great opportunities of enhancing Marxism with radically different theoretical currents in order to regain the above sought after "subjective moment of labor" (Burawoy 1979: 77).

Emerging in the United States in the late 1970s as an interdisciplinary discussion circle, Analytical Marxism was not, as theoretical schools seldom are, the product of isolated intellectual experimentation. In the words of one of its most known exponents, John Roemer, himself a former union organizer, the theoretical direction was born out of the "the chequered success of socialism" on the one hand and the

simultaneous "dubious failure of capitalism" on the other (1986a: 4)[5]. Another key advocate, Erik Olin Wright, sees Analytical Marxism's development as growing out of a firmly held stance that Marxism continues to "constitute a productive intellectual tradition within which to ask questions and formulate answers, but that this tradition was frequently burdened with a range of methodological and metatheoretical commitments that seriously undermined its explanatory potential." (1994: 179). While a close and rather concentrated circle, Analytical Marxism is far from any academically homogeneous mass, which the advocates themselves repeatedly make clear. As such, I again wish to make no claim as to providing a comprehensive review of the entirety of the therein developed thoughts. Far more, I seek to discuss some of the reflections that might particularly contribute to the thesis at hand.

Analytical Marxism begins from the perhaps obvious, yet by no means consistently recognized premise that the theoretical fountain of Marxism originally burst open in the works of Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels in the middle of the 19th century – more than 150 years ago. While this mature age in no way automatically discredits its findings and assumptions a priori, it does provoke questions as to whether the original theoretical thoughts might "be primitive by modern [scientific] standards, wrong in detail, and perhaps even in some basic claims." (Roemer 1986a: 4). In this sense, Analytical Marxism seeks not to "throw away a good tool because it fails in certain applications" (ibid), but to attempt to sharpen it for further and more precise use.

This endeavor primarily encompasses the following points summarized by Wright (1994: 181):

- The conscious use of "*conventional scientific norms*"
- Securing deep, logical and "*systematic conceptualizations*" of the theoretical terms used
- Developing and employing specific *micro-models* when studying unfolding processes and people's actions therein
- Emphasizing the "*intentional action of individuals*" when analyzing social processes and change

[5] A number of the articles cited here were published in the reader „Analytical Marxism" (1986), edited by John Roemer. This collection provides an excellent overview of some of the thoughts developed by the school.

Underlining their self-identity as one of “non-dogmatic Marxism“ (Roemer 1986a: 4) (a description many Marxists would perceive as a grand understatement), the scholars connected to this intellectual current commence their voyage by not necessarily negating central pillars of Marxist theory, but by posing basic questions logically *preceding* the establishment of those pillars. How can the economic base be determined by the productive forces and class struggle still be the motor of history (Cohen 1986)? Are classes then in fact meaningful collective actors in the development of history (Elster 1986a)? Is a socialist revolution actually in the material and rational interest of the working class in modern day global capitalism (Przeworski 1986)? Should Marxists even be interested in exploitation (Roemer 1986b)?

In searching for an approach with which to tackle the missing aspect of micro-mechanisms in Marxist theory, the Analytical Marxists enter into a realm few if any of their “fellow travelers” have ever ventured. For in their quest to revive Marxist theory and transform it into a tool able to hold up to scientific scrutiny, the group in question has ventured into what some Marxist theoreticians would perceive as the intellectual belly of the beast. While not all academics with an affinity to Analytical Marxism’s high scientific standards would necessarily subscribe to this point, the main representatives have chosen to embrace some form of *methodological individualism* “as a postulate in modeling Marxian concerns“ (Roemer 1986a: 7).

Generally speaking, we can say that from such a perspective, social phenomena can be broken down and explained “in terms of the elementary individual actions of which they are composed“ (Scott 2000: 127). Seeing individual human action as “the elementary unit of social life“ (Elster in Scott 2000: 127), social phenomena, institutions and change are explained as the result of actions and interactions between individuals. People are seen as being driven by their individual “wants or goals that express their ‘preferences’.“ (Scott 2000: 127). Armed with the information they have, the costs and benefits of actions are logically weighed out and decisions made are based upon calculations pointing to the maximal utility for the individual in question. In other words, “Rational individuals choose the alternative that is likely to give them the greatest satisfaction […].“ (ibid).

Before continuing, I should state that I personally view some of the assumptions of methodological individualism from a critical standpoint. This has less to do with condemning the viewpoint per se as a form of ideological domination or mystification

(Durrenberger 2009), although it can be and often is employed as such, but far more with the fact that I do not believe that said theory, with some of the very generalizing and abstract assumptions it proposes, is on its own capable to explain the countless aspects, even universal assumptions, it claims to cover. I particularly do not perceive a general reduction of all social phenomena and interactions to the individual level as especially helpful, as some of the proponents of methodological individualism seem to suggest. This critique is not only due to logical concerns, but reinforced by the endless masses of empirical data from different times and places pointing to the fact that individuals not only often act in group dynamics transcending the simple sum of individuals involved, but also that the actors involved do not necessarily exclusively pursue their interests in a consistently "rational" manner in the sense of individually and materially profit-maximizing and cost-reducing (Klandermans 1984; Kelly 1998; Ostrom 2000; Tarrow 2011). This latter point will also become clear in this thesis.

These cautions in mind, there is nonetheless good reason to take a closer look at this unconventional project aimed at fusing Marxist theory with an approach seeking to shed light on the micro-mechanisms of why and how people act as they do. It is Przeworski who rightly states that "Marxism was a theory of history without any theory about the actions of people who made this history." (1985: 382). Orthodox Marxism, viewing history entirely "at the level of forces, structures, collectives, and constraints" (ibid), pays in his eyes far too little attention to the mechanisms involved, let alone to the actors at play.

A useful theoretical and for our purposes especially relevant empirical platform upon which to discuss this shift from structure to agency is provided by the question of collective action. Besides being at the center of this ethnography's subject, the vast debate concerning collective action not only displays how Analytical Marxists distinguish themselves from orthodox Marxist theory, but also at least how part of the group differs from more orthodox methodological individualism.

While collective action is no doubt a highly debated and often controversial topic in the broader social sciences, proponents of methodological individualism in particular have spent large parts of their careers focused on the subject. Many of these scholars in fact seem to have dedicated their work towards attempting to establish a sui generi non-rationality and general improbability of unified agency by groups of individuals. While often constructing highly sophisticated models, their approaches

are largely defined more by abstract and primarily normative assumptions, i.e. on how people should act, rather than on empirical data of how people actually do act. One of the leading pieces of literature in this tradition is Mancur Olson's *The Logic of Collective Action* (1977), which sought to overturn "a cherished foundation of modern democratic thought that groups would tend to form and take collective action whenever members jointly benefitted." (Ostrom 2000: 137).

Olson's main goal was to break down the phenomenon of collective action to the level of the individual and thus refute the "popular notion that individuals with a common interest would act together so as to achieve that interest." (Kelly 1998: 68). What became known as the "zero contribution thesis" suggested that "unless the number of individuals in a group is quite small, or unless there is coercion or some other special device to make individuals act in their common interest, *rational, self-interested individuals will not act to achieve their common or group interests*." (Olson in Ostrom 2000: 137, italics in the original).

Using the example of an individual worker's perspective in the context of trade unionism, the argument goes as follows: "I will receive the benefits of union action whether I belong to the union or not. Therefore I might as well save the cost contributing to the union and free-ride on my colleagues. In any case my own contribution won't make a noticeable difference to the outcome of the union's action and furthermore nobody will notice if I don't contribute." (Kelly 1998: 68). In Olson's view, since everybody will calculate as such, seeing only costs and no exclusive advantages for active participants and will thus attempt to free-ride, collective action is generally unlikely. It is seen, at least in the absence of institutional rules suggesting otherwise, as simply "[…] not rational for individuals to cooperate, even though cooperation would bring positive results for all" (Acheson 2003: 8). As such, only in small groups, where individual contributions have a greater effect and (non-)activism is more noticeable (thus also entwined with social pressure from peers), or when institutions provide incentives or threaten constraints is collective action achievable: "The rational individual will then join the union and take part in strikes because the alternative course of action (free-riding) is more costly." (Kelly 1998: 69).

While some of Olson and his disciples' arguments are indeed plausible, empirical studies, both quantitative and qualitative, vividly contradict the universal applicability of the normative assumptions he seems to suggest. As Ostrom points out:

> The zero contribution thesis […] contradicts observations of everyday life. After all, many people vote, do not cheat on their taxes, and contribute effort to voluntary associations. Extensive fieldwork has by now established that individuals in all walks of life and all parts of the world voluntarily organize themselves so as to gain the benefits of trade, to provide mutual protection against risk, and to create and enforce rules that protect natural resources. (2000: 137f.)

In other words, while collective action may not be given or automatic, it indeed clearly exists in a number of different social situations, times and places. Indeed, looking closer to home, thriving collectives such as trade unions indeed managed to grow into large, active and successful organizations – even before they amassed enough political capital to push through stable institutions supporting and enhancing this growth. As will become clear in the following chapter, while certain institutions can most definitely help organized labor to flourish, they more often than not are only introduced after the latter has managed to build enough collective power so as to either force through the birth of favorable institutions or at least make a more integrational approach seem more rational for capital and the state.

As such, an obvious gap between the above theoretical assumptions and broader empirical reality becomes evident (Ostrom 2000: 138) and these abstract laws, proscribing how people should act, often simply collide with how people often do act. Representing a fundamental problem for Olson's thoughts (Kelly 1998; Scott 2000: 133), the mass of empirical data depicting dynamics of collective action further points to his neglect of any deeper layers of cultural and historical context as well as existing power and class relations and the formal and informal conditions these entail.

At the same time, however, it would conversely be equally irresponsible to portray the phenomenon of collective action as something automatically given or even easily constructed, let alone a common social phenomenon per se. And while there are countless examples of collective action unfolding every day in the diverse spheres of social interaction, there is just as much field data pointing to the existence of "the temptation to free ride on the provision of collective benefits" as a "universal problem" (Ostrom 2000: 138). This does not mean that collective action is impossible, but suggests that when it does come to collective action, "cooperation levels vary from extremely high to extremely low across different settings." (Ostrom 2000: 148).

It is in this sense that Analytical Marxism steps on to the stage to provide us with a more plausible approach. For if Olson and his followers point to how collective action does not come about, thus not only limiting the scope of analysis, but also to a certain extent contradicting empirical reality, Analytical Marxism provides us with stimulus to ask under which conditions collective action *does in fact come about*? Thus, it may be said that while Analytical Marxism approaches the same dilemma as other methodological individualists, namely the "problem" of collective action as a social phenomenon facing a number of obstacles, it does so from the other side of the tunnel.

Equally putting any romantic notions of collective action aside, however, Analytical Marxism points out that if we accept the extensive empirical data at hand suggesting that collective action does occur in specific settings of time and place, then not only does it exist as a social phenomenon that must be explained, but that it must under circumstances be *rational* for individuals to act together as a group in pursuit of their collective interests (Przeworski 1985; Elster 1986b). Thus, abandoning the more normative assumptions suggesting collective action as sui generi unlikely and irrational, yet at the same time remaining true to the above noted "conventional scientific norms" and perspective focused on the micro-mechanisms of consciously acting individuals (Wright 1994: 181), the far more complex task proposed is that of exploring how, when and under what circumstances collective action may appear or be constructed as calculatedly rational to the actors involved and what obstacles it must overcome to do so. In the words of Adam Przeworski, the "central question posed by methodological individualism is the following: under what conditions, from always to never, is solidarity (class cooperation) rational for individual workers or particular groups of them?" (1985: 389).

Abandoning the exclusively normative stance proscribing rational individuals as self-interested in the more narrow sense of short-term material gains, Analytical Marxism suggests that in taking a broader, more open and more empirically congruent concept of rationality, we must treat individuals participating in collective action indeed as rational, but not necessarily as exclusively individually "selfish" per se (Elster 1986b: 214). For it may indeed be rational in a more complex, broad and holistic sense of a long-term costs and benefits for an individual to participate in collective action from which the individual as well as the collective as a whole

benefits. This points to the fact that while free-riding is undoubtedly common, it may under circumstances not necessarily maximize one's benefits as much as choosing to participate in concerted action in pursuit of collective interests – even if the latter produces short-term costs. This is indeed something that will be empirically confirmed later on in this thesis.

This broader approach of rationality furthermore leads us to question what we are actually talking about when discussing the concept of interests. Generally speaking, most Analytical Marxists have chosen to focus their attention on questions of "material interests" as anything else might blur the scientific rigidity of their approach. According to Wright, this encompasses the "interests people have in their material standard of living, understood as the package of toil, consumption and leisure. Material interests are thus not interests in maximizing consumption per se, but rather interests in the trade-offs between toil, leisure and consumption." (1997: 5). At the same time, interests must not be seen as something existing in social isolation or as given, but are in fact embedded in social relations and within individuals' interactions with others (Fung and Wright; Mansbridge in Lévesque and Murray 2010: 338). So, like power (Wolf 1999), interests must as well be seen from a relational standpoint.

That being said, while the pursuit of material interests may be seen as an important motor behind determining social actors' decisions to participate or even initiate collective action, it is not necessarily the only one. Slightly widening Analytical Marxism's scope, three points are of particular importance in this regard.

First of all, collectively acting individuals may not only seek the actual consequences of collective action themselves as rewards (such as higher wages), but can also perceive collective action in itself as a means to furthering their individual interests. Let me elaborate. Borrowing from a broad definition of *bounded rationality*, which takes into consideration the cognitive bounds of human beings and that in reality decision-making may be rational yet not necessarily optimizing per se (Gigerenzer and Selten 2001), as well as recognizing the loaded social context in which human (inter)actions take place, we may broaden the catalogue of potential rewards produced by collective action. Besides material benefits, such things as prestige, reputation, social standing and even individual fulfillment can matter just as much. Or, as the economist Hirschman asks, why should collective action be seen only as a cost, when to many it may be a benefit in itself: "For people whose lives are mired in

drudgery and desperation, the offer of an exciting, risky, and possibly beneficial campaign of collective action may be an incentive in itself.“ (paraphrased in Tarrow 2011: 29).

Secondly and directly related to the above, social dynamics of participation (Klandermans in Tarrow 2011: 24) and the diverse settings of social relations in which this unfolds must equally be taken into consideration. While only briefly touched upon, this is a point indeed taken up to a certain extent by the Analytical Marxists. It is Elster who suggests that “as a result of interacting with one another people come to be concerned about one another, so that there emerges a positive interdependency in the reward structures.”, thus encouraging the prospect of collective action (1986b: 213). While not producing specific empirical examples, Elster indeed suggests that when it comes to “working-class collective action, this approach would appear to have the advantage of realism. In the light of many studies of the history of the early working class, it is hard to believe that their solidarity was nothing but long-term self-interest.“ (ibid).

And finally, from a more negative standpoint, otherwise unwilling actors may choose to participate in collective action in order to avoid social sanctions from being inflicted upon them by their peers due to non-participation. This is indeed something that not only Analytical Marxists recognize, but also Olson himself, although the latter limits the relevance thereof to small groups. Of course, besides social sanctions, when certain institutions exist, these may also sanction non-participation in a more material sense. The latter is something particularly emphasized by the Analytical Marxists.

In the end, Przeworski’s concludes that from the perspective of Analytical Marxism, “The appropriate view [of collective class conflict] is neither one of two ready-to-act classes nor of abstract individuals, but of individuals who are embedded in different types of relations with other individuals within a multidimensionally described social structure.“ (Przeworski 1985: 393). So, despite or in their view precisely because of their general allegiance to methodological individualism, Analytical Marxism does allow for social actors to individually conclude that concerted action may indeed be in their individual interests (Elster 1986b). Actually translating that into action, however, means not only overcoming free-rider problems, but coordination problems as well (Betram and Carling 1998). And while it is often no simple task, the former can be overcome through the above mechanisms (social rewards, social pressure,

institutional stimulants and sanctions, etc.). And the question of coordination is, of course, the function of trade unions as organizations.

Despite these strong and refreshing elements provided by Analytical Marxism, their theoretical contributions are not without limits. While not fatal to its utility as a theoretical influence, a number of issues point to the fact that Analytical Marxism, just like more classic Marxist approaches before it, will indeed remain one tool in our toolbox and cannot represent our sole explanatory instrument.

Generally speaking, the limits of Analytical Marxism are largely located in precisely the same sphere that represents its strength. For while the provocative insistency of the Analytical Marxists to shift our view (almost exclusively) to the level of the individual and take on more positivistic, laboratory-like scientific standards has no doubt provided us with a fruitful stimulus to broaden our horizon from that of conventional Marxism, it seems the baby may have been thrown out with the bathwater. What I mean by that is that in its search for a scientifically plausible form of Marxism, these scholars have, self-consciously and "unabashedly" committed themselves to a complex and particularly intense level of abstraction (Roemer 1986a: 3). While all theories must transcend single case studies and enter onto a certain level of abstraction, Analytical Marxism has in its quest for positivist legitimacy to a certain extent shifted Marxism's focus from a theory grounded in empirical data to one more based on laboratory-like games of intellectual experimentation. Thus, Marx and Engels' – as well as wider anthropology's – focus on "real, active men" (1974: 47) seems to have gone somewhat forgotten and theory's direct relationship to its empirical base become severed. This generally common weakness of methodological individualism is particularly troublesome from a social anthropological perspective, as collective action tends to be treated as "parts of natural processes rather than historically given cultural or political matters […]" (Durrenberger and Reichart 2010: 6).

In a similar sense, despite the value of pushing us to uncover the micro-mechanisms underlying Marx's original thoughts, the analytical value of Analytical Marxism's choice to place more-or-less all bets upon methodological individualism remains, precisely because of this almost exclusive concentration, questionable. One gets the impression that the Analytical Marxists do so in order to somehow legitimize their use of Marxist theory. This is not completely absurd given that their inputs were

developed towards the end of the Cold War, when the failures of real-existing-socialism not only questioned the value of Marxist theory as a political program, but its validity as a scientific tool as well. My critique is, however, directed less at the integration of elements of methodological individualism per se, as has hopefully become clear above, but far more at the almost exclusive reliance upon a methodology which has time and time again shown itself to be only one piece of the greater puzzle when confronted with empirical reality. This particularly became clear above, when we were led to enhance the Analytical Marxist approach with ideas from related, yet different schools of thought (such as bounded rationality, participation theory).

Finally, and as a direct consequence of the above, despite asking the right questions on collective action, Analytical Marxists often seem to fall back on neo-classical assumptions for the answers. This is primarily expressed in perceiving the existence of formal institutions as the main if not only means to achieve collective action by dissuading members of the collective in question from noncooperation (Przeworski 1985: 392). While in organized labor institutions often play a vital role in solving collective action problems, exclusive reliance on institutional solutions can not only be problematic but quite often simply impossible, especially when it comes to contentious collective action in a social movement-oriented sense. While institutions may and in some cases do encourage collective action on the level of formal membership (such as in the case of the *closed shops* in the Anglosphere), only rarely if ever do institutions exist that explicitly encourage contentious collective action such as strikes. While in some times and places institutions deem organized work-stoppages legal, thus formally enabling them, seldom do institutions exist that actively reward (or sanction) (non-)participation in industrial action given that labor peace is generally at the heart of institutional trade-offs between capital and labor. Furthermore, Analytical Marxism's heavy reliance on institutions as explanations (instead of as conditions) for collective-action-problems neglects to explain how such institutions came about in the first place.

Thus, to come to a résumé, we may view the Analytical Marxists in much the same light as they themselves saw Marx in. While the theory may not provide all of the answers, it definitely points us in the right direction. For what both the Analytical Marxists and Michael Burawoy have achieved, and this is significant, is to force us to

shift our view from focusing solely on the determinant macro-level and restore "the subjective moment of labor" (1979: 77). As such, we are encouraged to not only study the micro-mechanisms of collective agency, but also to do so from a perspective taking the conscious thoughts and actions of individuals seriously and seeking to uncover the rationality of their decisions to participate (or not) in collective action. So, while we may not choose to adopt everything Burawoy and the Analytical Marxists have developed, as they themselves did with classical Marxism, they do provide a number of decisive stimulants for assembling the theoretical toolbox needed to explore organized labor in the Swiss construction industry. As such, we are again reminded of Erik Olin Wright's words in that we might profit more if we were to view Marxism not as "a unified theory with well-defined boundaries, but [as] a family of theories united by a common terrain of debate and questions." (Wright 1994: 178).

Arising from Conflict: Rethinking Institutions Within Capitalism

Our discussion with Analytical Marxism points us in two directions. On the one hand, it shows that especially when attempting to construct a holistic exploration of a trade union's various power resources, we will have to at least partially look elsewhere. Using theoretical inputs from the Jena power resources model, this is something that will be done in the next subchapter. On the other hand, it points towards the importance of understanding individual as well as collective agency – and the aims and goals thereof – in the context of and in relation to new, existing and changing social institutions. And while the Analytical Marxists' overly strong reliance on institutions as *explanations* for collective action may be problematic, this does not do away with the fact that social institutions as such "are prevalent wherever individuals attempt to live and work together" (Knight 1992: 1) and thus to a large extent shape the *conditions* under which people act. Furthermore, institutions equally represent the social framework in which concessions, compromises and agreements, such as early retirement or minimum wages, are realized.

What is important in our case, however, is that we find an institutional approach that will enable us to not only understand situations of cooperation and consensus between the different social players involved, in our case labor and capital, but also to make sense of episodes of conflict stemming from the structural relationship between the two. For this we turn to the political scientist Jack Knight's thoughts on

“Institutions and Social Conflict“ (1992). That we choose to study Knight’s thoughts directly after our excursion into Analytical Marxism is of no coincidence. Knight himself was a student of Jon Elster as well as being strongly influenced by Adam Przeworski, both important representatives of Analytical Marxism. Despite not embracing an (Analytical) Marxist standpoint per se, Knight’s sympathy for certain aspects thereof does not go unnoticed. Claiming that while Marx’s “emphasis on distributional effects is important to the explanation of institutional maintenance”, especially in the greater capitalist mode of production, its weak point according to Knight is that “it fails to enter adequately into an account of the mechanism of institutional change.“ (1992: 9).

In his own words, Knight seeks to provide the missing micro-foundations for the macro-level accounts provided by Marx as well as Max Weber:

> Macro-level accounts of social institutions can find in the distributive theory those microfoundations that capture their underlying ideas. […] Here the distributive account demonstrates that rational-choice theory is capable of treating issues such as power, social context, and community. (1992: 211).

Similar to many of his institutionalist colleagues, Knight sees social institutions such as laws, collective labor agreements, etc. as:

> […] sets of rules that structure social interactions in particular ways. These rules (1) provide information about how people are expected to act in particular situations, (2) can be recognized by those who are members of the relevant group as the rules to which others conform in these situations, and (3) structure the strategic choices of actors in such a way as to produce equilibrium outcomes. (1992: 54)

As such, the main function of social institutions is to establish rules guiding or at least influencing the future actions and strategies of social actors by providing information, sanctions and social expectations concerning the different strategic options available for the actors concerned. Thus, we find institutions “wherever individuals attempt to live and work together”, or in other words “in all aspects of our social life“ (1992: 1).

Like many of his colleagues, Knight explicitly uses a rational choice approach to build a bridge between individual actions and the development of institutions structuring wider social interactions: “People choose those strategies that maximize their expected utility. The key here is the capacity of social institutions to stabilize social

expectations.“ (1992: 209f.). Knight takes the critical discussions about this theoretical area seriously, however, and claims a “broad view” of methodological individualism: “Institutions are clearly the product of human action. […] Nonetheless, it does emphasize that institutional rules have a special collective quality about them.“ (1992: 74). Thus, Knight seems to imply no direct contradiction between collective actions and rational individuals. He regularly talks of trade unions, collective organizations of workers, as social actors and not simply sums of individuals. Knight furthermore highlights the importance of not remaining solely on the level of abstraction, but of aiming at an empirical and “actual understanding” of how institutions shape social life (1992: 213). Interestingly enough, it is precisely this rational choice approach that sees Knight part ways with many of his institutionalist colleagues. Let me elaborate.

Following Olson’s influential work (1977), theoretical discussions about social institutions and their role in regulating collective goods as well as interactions blossomed. Implicit in a large part of this work has been the belief that dominant and prevailing institutions in society are those which optimally coordinate social interaction and bring the highest amount of *collective goods* or benefits to a supposedly homogeneous community. In other words, institutions are generally here to benefit everybody. As such, in these neo-classical theories, power asymmetries are generally seen as unimportant and interactions between social actors tend to be implicitly perceived as interactions between equals. To a certain extent, this represents a continuation of the thoughts by David Hume and Adam Smith (Knight 1992: 10).

Despite the fact that the great majority of these authors emphasizing the importance of social institutions have claimed a rational choice approach, Knight unveils a stark contradiction between this and the above mentioned assumption of collective benefits. For, if we presume that social actors as rational beings will pursue their own interests, why should we presume that they will support – let alone initiate – rules, which do not maximize their own utility and, in some cases, even diminish it? Knight’s answer is clear. They will not and as such, theories emphasizing collective benefits are unable to explain the micro-foundations for the development of social institutions (1992: 39). Noting that empirical analyses of existing institutions clearly point out that institutions effect some social actors differently than others, Knight invites us to

consider institutions not as neutral inventions for mutual benefit but as originating as a by-product of social conflict between self-interested actors with power asymmetries.

For Knight, social conflict is the interaction between actors with at least partially antagonistic interests, who optimally and intentionally pursue their goals by choosing certain strategies according to the given circumstances and the strategies their opponents choose (1992: 17). Thus, in Knight's view, while Marx and Weber emphasized questions of resources, distribution and power, yet neglected the establishment of micro-foundations thereof, neoclassic and mainstream institutionalist theory seem to have paradoxically committed the opposite sin.

So, while institutions may as a side-effect be efficient and in fact provide collective benefits, these are not the driving mechanisms behind the actual emergence and development of institutions:

> Rather than focusing on collective goals, self-interested actors want institutions that produce those social outcomes that are best for them as individual strategic actors. […] This is not to say that social institutions do not produce benefits for all of the members of a group or community. […] The main point here is that such gains cannot serve as the basis for a social explanation; rather, these benefits are merely a by-product of the pursuit of individual gain. (1992: 38)

Emphasizing the "primacy of distributional consequences in all aspects of explaining social institutions" (1992: 41), the primary aim of social actors is to "gain strategic advantage vis-à-vis other actors, and therefore, the substantive content of those rules should generally reflect distributional concerns." (1992: 40). Thus, supposedly inefficient institutions are not necessarily faulty institutions, but reflect the self-interest of powerful actors rationally pursuing individual benefits. Of course, despite stemming from the intentions of the actors involved, the "final form of institutional rules" (1992: 27) should not be understood as a mere dictatorial design of the most powerful actor, but as a dialectic product of the conflictual interaction between the parties involved. Thus, institutional arrangements always have a certain ambiguity and while powerful actors will choose institutions that give them (distributional) advantages, "[…] they are faced with the fact that social institutions constrain the choices of all actors in some ways." (1992: 64).

Like Olson and the Analytical Marxists, Knight pays particular attention to cases of organized labor as a form of collective bargaining on such issues as wages, working conditions, the organization of production and participation in decision making – all questions relating to "who will control the revenues of the firm's production process and how they will be distributed" (1992: 195). He also discusses the problem of free riding as an omnipresent threat to collective action. Unlike Olson, however, Knight perceives the collective organization of workers as a potentially rational act to enhance their bargaining power and emphasizes that the "relative bargaining power of workers and employers depends directly on the workers' *ability* to organize and act collectively." (1992: 197, italics by CK).

However, Knight equally emphasizes the key importance of overcoming collective-action problems. While unions need a large membership in order to negotiate successfully, employees themselves are "more inclined to join unions when their chances of losing their jobs from membership are low and their chances of gaining benefits are high." (1992: 198). Protecting union members from employer repression, thereby lowering the costs of unionization, can be provided either by strength in numbers, yet also by legal rights enforced by the state. That being said, Knight also points to the fact that while state intervention may be profitable for some of the actors involved, state intervention is usually only initiated by weaker unions without well-organized working classes. Furthermore, while state intervention may represent a compensation for a union's missing collective bargaining power, it is an ambiguous measure as it introduces an actor with its own interests into the field. In fact, while state intervention can be advantageous, legal institutions in "advanced industrial societies" tend to constrain unions' scopes of action more than they protect or enhance them as disproportionate constraints are placed upon the unions. This is especially so when it comes to regulations of union recognition and the legal ability to strike (1992: 205f.).

One reason for this ambiguity of state interventions is the fact that collective-bargaining institutions interact with other social institutions of greater domination, primarily in this case the institution of private property. As such, "For the weak, it is a mixed blessing; for the strong, it is a last resort." (1992: 208). Thus,

> In countries with a weakly organized working class where the collective-action problem has not been resolved without institutional protections, institutionalization is beneficial vis-à-vis the unconstrained market […]. In countries with a strong and unified working class where the collective-action problem has been resolved without formal institutional protections, such institutionalization is a hindrance to workers because the loss vis-à-vis the unconstrained market can be great. (1992: 206)

After enlightening ourselves with Knight's insight, it indeed becomes clear that Olson, as well as to a certain extent the Analytical Marxists, indeed seem to have taken or at least implied a rather functionalist stance when explaining how institutions can aid collective organization and action. "We need institutions, and therefore we have them." (Knight 1992: 210) seems to be the logic. So, while Knight shows that institutions can aid or hinder collective processes, he also points to the fact that these institutions themselves reflect former or current power asymmetries and must thus be seen as the products of conflicts already played out in the past.

Even when social institutions are established, however, this in no way means that this is the end of the game. In fact, it probably makes far more sense to think of institutions as social processes and not to assume some futile illusion of endless stability. For precisely because institutions are products of continuous power struggles, they can themselves only be dynamic and will continue to be shaped and changed by shifting power relations. Depending on how these power relations shift and how the actors concerned behave, i.e. which strategies they take, even long trusted institutions can falls into crisis.

A number of actions and interactions can open the door for institutional change and crisis, especially since "[s]ome people may prefer other rules, on distributional grounds. If so, then there will always be an incentive for those actors to change the status quo." (1992: 174). This is, in itself, a constant given as institutions can and most often do have very different effects, advantages and disadvantages for the various actors involved. Generally speaking, however, we can say that when institutions start to no longer fulfill the function they should or when players begin to ignore the "rules of the game" or interpret them in contradictory terms, we find ourselves in a situation of upheaval. This is because in order for institutions to function, even despite (or precisely because of) opposed interests, social actors have

to be confident of the credibility of the institution and thus of the reliability of the information provided on what to expect (1992: 73f.).

Of course, a number of situations can see social actors stray from the hitherto institutional path respectfully from the palette of options condoned by the institutional arrangements concerned. On the one hand, this can be due to external forces or events. These may, for example, change the settings which previously allowed the original institutions to flourish, i.e. which previously made them make sense (1992: 145). On the other hand, distributional effects may be produced by existing institutions which were not anticipated by the actors upon negotiation (1992: 146). If we assume, like Knight, that the actors involved tend to represent rational beings attempting to maximize their utility based on a cost-benefit calculus, then as such we can assume that they will no longer choose to play by certain rules of the game if they expect the (long- or short-term) benefits from straying from that course to be greater than the sanctions. Such a situation can often arise from changing power relations which see one actor's bargaining power rise in relation to the others. In other words, social institutions are historical in the sense that they are born into particular social relations and (in)balances of power relations. When the latter change, so may the institutions once built upon them as well.

Generally speaking, the conflict-oriented institutionalist approach of Jack Knight provides us with a plausible tool of analysis to investigate the background, role and development of social institutions as well as the motivations of the various actors involved. And if we accept that social institutions are indeed everywhere, both as the rules of the game as well as the products of the players playing the game, then Knight's thoughts on the issue are another asset to our budding theory network. The value of Knight's approach lies not only in its inherent and organic relation to both classic and especially Analytical Marxism, and is thus easily compatible to the other tools in our set, but also due to its focus on power relations and conflicts of interest as an inherently defining aspect of social relations. As will become clear, Knight's insights will be of considerable help when it comes to explaining the numerous and sometimes seemingly ambiguous institutions existing in the Swiss construction industry.

That being said, while we have now discussed the political economic structural foundations of capitalism allowing trade unions to exist and function, as well as the

need for understanding micro-mechanisms of collective action and the institutions under which they unfold and the ones they produce, we have yet to find a perspective bringing these factors together and highlighting what this actually means for a union's strategic choices. It is for this that we now turn to the Jena Power Resources Approach, which will not only provide us with a theoretical approach to tackle these questions, but equally sum up the theoretical toolbox we will then have assembled.

Empowering Labor: the Jena Power Resources Approach

We commenced this chapter with the dialectic materialism of Marx, telling us that due to the organization of the capitalist mode of production, workers should and must transform from a class in itself into a class for itself able to struggle for its own collective interests. Realizing that while Marx gave us finely-tuned instruments to analyze the greater capitalist economy, yet neglected the agency of social actors therein, we then proceeded to sharpen our tools with the ideas of Michael Burawoy and those of Analytical Marxism, encouraging us to look at the micro-mechanisms of how such class struggle might unfold. We then moved on to Jack Knight's critical insight that social institutions – both born out of as well as conditioning labor's agency – must be understood as a product of social conflict between different actors with often different and sometimes even antagonistic interests.

As noted above, however, we have yet to find a theoretical approach bringing this all together and enabling us to make sense of how a trade union as a strategic actor actually develops and uses its agency in the context within which it finds itself. Or in other words, to return to our main research question: How can we explain how a trade union shifts the existing power relations in workers' favor in the context of a changing construction industry and a complex environment of industrial institutions?

Inspired by the wave of organizational transformations within innovative trade unions seeking to revitalize, a group of academics centered around the renowned German sociologist Klaus Dörre sought to assemble a theoretical model that focused on just that. Strongly inspired by the Analytical Marxist Erik Olin Wright, these scholars

constructed a model that has become known as the *Jena Power Resources Approach* (Schmalz and Dörre 2013)[6].

The Jena approach begins by reiterating what is at the heart of the subject at hand: "Power is at the core of current debates over the future of trade unionism." (Lévesque and Murray 2010: 334). This is, of course, not simply because trade unions (or employers for that matter) are guided by some proverbial power trip for the sake of it, but due to the simple and broad assumption that "Power reflects and is the material basis of the complex relationship between actors [in general]." (ibid). In a similar sense, Wright himself further describes the concept of power in the context of class analysis as "the *capacity of individuals and organizations to realize class interests*." (2000: 6, italics in original). If we assume that the interests of one class can and often are opposed to each other, then "this implies that the capacity of workers to realize their class interests depends in part on their capacity to counter the power of capitalists." (ibid). Thus, we must envision power as a relational concept (ibid), just as the anthropologist Eric Wolf pointed out in his in-depth discussion of the subject in *Envisioning Power* (1999).

Precisely because of power's fundamental position at the center of labor-capital relations, what the Jena scholars emphasize is that it is simply not enough to say that a union must focus on regaining power. This is not because that would be wrong or missing the point, but because the topic is more complex and the field of power relations deeply heterogeneous. It is precisely this heterogeneity that the group aims to take into consideration. Proposing that organized labor must be recognized as an actor in a field of dynamic power relations, the Jena approach dissects those relations so as to more aptly understand how a union may reach its goals. It does so by viewing power not as a unified whole itself, but as an ensemble of various elements – some more important than others. Emphasizing that in the end these elements are all inherently (yet dialectically) interlinked, their approach differentiates between four pillars of power resources.

[6] As this thesis is written in English and a number of the Jena scholars' direct influences were originally published in English (such as Wright (2000) or Lévesque and Murray (2010)), I have sometimes chosen to directly quote the latter in their original language so as to avoid double translations that might blur the intended meaning of certain terms and definitions.

Starting with *structural power*, this analytical category refers to the power arising from the position of workers in the wider historical as well as industry-particular economic system in question. Perceiving it as a "primary" source of power (Arbeitskreis Strategic Unionism 2013: 347), such structural power is strongly reminiscent of Marx's thoughts on why workers may be exploited, but through that same exploitive system are simultaneously armed with possibilities to disrupt and therefor shape the very process of labor. This is first of all reflected in a subcategory of structural power the authors refer to as *production power*. By having the potential to interrupt the process of production by withdrawing one's labor power, this resource is often articulated through collective actions such as work stoppages. The main idea is that through their place in the labor process as producers of surplus value, workers are in a position to drive a metaphorical (and sometimes literal) wedge into the process of capital accumulation, thus causing or threatening to cause severe loss to employers' interests. This is especially given in the case of strategically placed worker groups in key industrial sectors. It is, however, essential to emphasize that this production power simply provides workers with the structural *opportunity* to disrupt the process of capital accumulation and not necessarily with the organizational ability to do so.

A slightly different subcategory of structural power is less clearly derived from Marxist theory and leans on the more classic thoughts of supply and demand on the labor market. This so-called *market power* draws its essence from the relationship between a tightened labor market and the possession of certain qualifications in high demand. A far more subtle form of structural power, this resource can be tapped more indirectly as well as individually. Referring to Polanyi, however, the Jena group reminds us that even when such individual strategies are taken, they are nonetheless located in collective social settings, such as segmented workforces, and that markets themselves are per se socially embedded and sometimes closely regulated by institutions enforced by the state as well as other actors (Arbeitskreis Strategic Unionism 2013: 350).

As such, this market power indeed plays its own particular role and is sometimes individually tapped, but it does not do so in a limitless fashion. Furthermore, both sides of this structural power, production and market power, are directly and strongly influenced by the rate of economic growth, recession and upheavals and are as such in a constant state of flux. This touches upon questions of the "making and remaking"

of the working class (Arrighi in Arbeitskreis Strategic Unionism 2013: 351), when new forms of more or less precarious employment are created, but also upon larger waves such as high rates of structural unemployment.

A second main power resource discussed by the Jena group is that of *institutional power*. Stemming from institutional arrangements in either an industry or legal setting, this resource refers to power flowing from the "rules of the game" that either constrain or empower labor in pursuing its interests. Since, as previously pointed out by Knight, institutions are not simply given or fall into place for the greater good, but are born out of concrete struggles waged by workers collectively tapping into their structural power, this form is considered a "secondary form of power" (Brinkmann and Nachtwey in Arbeitskreis Strategic Unionism 2013: 356) and the institutions themselves thus as "remnants of earlier activations of power resources" (Korpi in Arbeitskreis Strategic Unionism 2013: 356).

Whether constitutional guarantees allowing trade unions to recruit members and collect dues or industry-specific collective labor agreements defining minimum wages, the rights and possibilities provided by such institutions are – very similar to Knight's thoughts on the matter – seen as products of struggles between labor and capital pursuing their respective interests. While such institutions may not be direct or even intended results of conflicts, and they may not even be immediately identified as furthering either labor or capital interests, the power resulting from such institutions and the rules they set can have a decisive impact. So, while institutions are born out of earlier conflicts, they may equally constitute (some of) the rules of the game for future conflicts.

That being said, institutional power is an ambiguous one. On the one hand, institutional power is a double edged sword. For, while it may render certain strengths and benefits to both workers and the unions representing them, the institutions doing so – as again Knight points out above – may simultaneously limit a union's agency in other questions. For due to the fact that "institutional power stems from antagonistic class relations" (Arbeitskreis Strategic Unionism 2013: 356), institutions are not isolated products of one or the other social actor, but ones acting as a compromise or concession in order to overcome or at least momentarily calm conflict from disturbing the process of capital accumulation. It is thus of no

coincidence that institutions providing workers and unions with certain rights often also limit their legal possibilities to call strikes. This is not necessarily a conspiratorial plot, but simply due to the fact that since institutions arise as products of conflict between two or more parties, they per se simultaneously constrain all actors involved in one way or another (Knight 1992).

On the other hand, and equally ambiguous, is the fact that institutional power is a temporal, historical resource. It is so in two senses. First of all, this means that even when the conditions that brought about the institutions in question begin to change, the institutions themselves may respond somewhat slower to that change. So, while the greater power relations surrounding the institutions may have already shifted, institutions born into previous power constellations and out of earlier struggles may continue to prevail. Second of all and in the opposite sense, while institutions supporting one or the other actor in society may continue to do so even after the latter has come to assume a weaker position, this does not mean they are indefinite. If institutions are to remain in existence as they are, then they must ever so often be renewed by the same interest conflicts that brought them about. In other words, if a collective agreement came about through industrial action and against fierce employer resistance, it would be foolish to think of such an entity as indestructible unless at least the threat of a strike resurfaces every now and then. Even then, however, changing economic and political settings can shake these institutions in their very core.

A third power resource, and one that the Jena group only added in a later revised version of the Jena Power Resources Approach, is that of *societal power*. Somewhat different than the previous two forms, this power resource is one striving towards a Gramscian idea of hegemony (Arbeitskreis Strategic Unionism 2013: 361). Transcending the more materialistic level of political economy and institutions, this category refers to the power a union can gain from influencing, shaping and mobilizing wider public opinion beyond the immediate industry or workplace affected. This can on the one hand be done through constructing alliances with other societal actors, such as consumer or community groups, social movements and even churches. By doing so, unions not only gain access to some of the resources of other actors in such an alliance, but are also put into a position in which they are able to

transcend the perhaps narrow setting of the workplace in question. This is what the Jena scholars consider *cooperative power*.

Societal power can, however, also be articulated as a form of *discursive power* representing the ability to portray the interests of the workers involved at least to a certain extent as being congruent with the interests of "society" or the majority thereof. Such interventions in wider public debates or even the construction thereof are deeply interwoven with the narrative skills of the union to portray its struggle as being harmonious with the dominant "moral economy" (Thompson in Arbeitskreis Strategic Unionism 2013: 361) or their opponents as having violated broadly held moral codes. It also enables the union to place its demands in a broader portrayal of social justice and liberate them from being denigrated as nothing more than the narrow particular interests of a spoiled labor aristocracy. That being said, exclusively tapping into this form of power resource can equally be perceived as a sign of weakness when other power resources are missing or drained. Furthermore, while naming and shaming opponents and constructing a discourse of justice and morality are key ingredients to a successful campaign, unions must equally and almost simultaneously be able to provide constructive answers to the problems they highlight and criticize.

All this being said, while structural power as a primary source of power is decisive, as Marx already pointed out almost two centuries ago, and institutional as well as societal power are undoubtedly important channels to pursue worker interests, a fourth power resource is no less than pivotal when it comes to a union's ability to actually tap into any of these resources: *associational power*. Associational power is nothing more and nothing less than "the various forms of power that result from the formation of collective organizations of workers" (Wright 2000: 962). Derived from individual workers or groups of workers constituting themselves into an entity capable of collectively acting in pursuit of their interests, this category of power is the primary and underlying key not only to accessing structural power and unleashing societal power but as such also necessary to wage conflicts giving birth to institutions and institutional power. As such, associational power is the main bedrock of our pyramid of union power resources. While it is only one part of the greater picture of power relations, it is an absolutely vital one logically preceding organized labor's use of almost all aspects of the previously described power resources.

Associational power is described as being neither “spontaneous” nor “subtle” (Silver in Arbeitskreis Strategic Unionism 2013: 352), but far more the product of often protracted processes of organizational growth. This can take the form of workplace associations, worker councils, industry-wide unions and even political parties pursuing labor interests in the electoral arena. When it comes to trade unions, the Jena approach suggests measuring this associational power on two separate, yet interconnected levels.

First of all, associational power must fundamentally be understood as the “power of numbers“ (Marx in Arbeitskreis Strategic Unionism 2013: 353): the higher the degree of workers organized in the union, the greater the union’s influence. Besides using that degree of organization to apply political and moral pressure on an employer, many states also have institutional settings demanding a certain amount of representation as a legal condition for union recognition. A large membership simultaneously allows for the necessary financial, infrastructural and personnel resources needed to wage industrial strife: “For not only do powerful unions possess impressively high membership statistics, but also vast financial means […]“ (Arbeitskreis Strategic Unionism 2013: 353f.).

Second of all – and this is decisive – a union attempting to shift power relations in its favor must not only have a membership that is willing to pay membership dues as a formal badge of belonging, but it must also have a membership willing to act in concerted action in pursuit of its collective interests (Arbeitskreis Strategic Unionism 2013: 354). While a particular union may perhaps formally represent only a small portion of the workforce, if it has the capacity to mobilize that membership and perhaps even beyond its formal membership, thus translating quantitative membership into industrial action, it can represent a formidable force. Conversely, a union with a high degree of membership, yet with little capacity to actually mobilize those workers into taking concerted action will have little leverage at the bargaining table besides moral and in some cases legal arguments of representation.

In order to achieve a high degree of mobilization as mentioned above, studies have shown that this not only means constructing optimal organizational frames therefor and defining concrete methods and tactics of communication and mobilization, but also that the higher the degree of *participation* and the more involved workers are in

the strategic as well as operative process of decision making, the higher the turnout will be (Schmalz and Dörre (eds.) 2013). In other words, democratic structures may not only be a method of representation, but also one of strategic efficiency.

The four pillars described above make up the pyramid of power resources according to the Jena model. Whether the associational power of being able to call a strike or the structural power making that strike particularly impactful, the "societal" shaming and blaming of a scandalous move by a company or the forcing through of negotiations in court due to favorable institutions, the Jena approach provides us with an all-encompassing, yet at the same time differentiated model to understand as well as critique a labor union's moves on the chess board. What is essential, however, is that despite including four analytical categories, all four must be understood as being in a constant and interdependent relationship to one another. In other words, the single power resources described cannot be understood as additive elements, but are a dynamic, interconnected and sometimes even contradictive construction. It is the union's job to analyze its position within that pyramid and develop optimal strategies balancing out the various power resources at its disposal as well as developing ways to strengthen or widen the resources at hand.

While the actual power resources themselves are illuminated above, the Jena model emphasizes that in order to actually use those power resources in practical campaigns, unions must continuously develop and adapt a certain set of capabilities and skills connected thereto (Lévesque and Murray 2010; Arbeitskreis Strategic Unionism 2013). Perceiving this as a union's "strategic choice" (Brinkmann et al. 2008), the Jena group suggests that the actors involved must know when and especially how to tap which array of power resources.

Decisive in this process are (Arbeitskreis Strategic Unionism 2013):

- *Learning capacity*: Starting from the recognition that society, its political economic structures and the institutions therein are in a constant state of flux, unions (as well as all social actors) must equally remain in a constant process of learning. This means on the one hand constantly studying the changing political economic as well as discursive environment at hand and on the other hand determining and continuously developing old and new methods of intervention therein. How have the lives and realities of workers changed since

the altering of political economic structures allowing new forms of labor? Which organizing strategies are needed in a changed labor setting? How do we train our organizers and activist members in this regard?

- *Organizational flexibility*: This skill refers to the ability of an organization to adapt its own organizational structures and functioning in order to optimize its output and balance its actions with the structural conditions at hand. For example, what structures are needed in the given environment in order to optimize membership numbers, mobilization capability as well as political influence and financial and personnel means? Organizational flexibility is essentially at the heart of all efforts of union renewal and revitalization (Voss and Sherman 2000; Arbeitskreis Strategic Unionism 2013: 371). That being said, this capacity is at the same time perhaps one of the most difficult skills to master, as it involves the "organizational sociologically improbable case" that bureaucratic organizations depart from their "seemingly prescribed path" (Brinkmann in Arbeitskreis Strategic Unionism 2013: 371). While this can be done, as will become clear, this is often a complex and not always harmonious negotiation between existing realities and an organization's ambitions.

- *Conflict capacity*: While unions are not always in constant and direct conflict with employers and indeed cooperate closely on certain levels and at certain times (Wright 2000), unions as "class organizations" (Deppe 2012) nonetheless find themselves in a political economy of inherent structural conflict. Thus, a successful union must have a high degree of conflict capacity. This means on the one hand the actual willingness to engage in conflicts when necessary, but also the capacity and (micro-mechanic) skills needed therefor, such as strategic courses of action, appropriate methods as well as economic means to support itself and its members during strike periods. This means having experience and know-how in the organization and execution of collective mobilizations, but also being flexible enough to avoid "ritualizing strike procedures" (Arbeitskreis Strategic Unionism 2013: 372) and retaining the ability to develop innovative forms of collective conflict.

- *Framing*: If we assume that societal power and the construction of hegemonial discourses is an important power resource to unions, then the organization in question must be able to construct, provide and spread broad narratives built according to its interpretative frame. Whether on a direct and industry-particular level aimed at workers themselves or in the sense of a more grand narrative addressed at the broader public, "The ability to provide overarching narratives as a frame of reference for union action is increasingly seen as a key factor in union renewal." (Lévesque and Murray 2010: 343). This means identifying and seizing the "right topics" at the "right time" and optimally using it to intervene in societal debates and worker mobilizations (Arbeitskreis Strategic Unionism 2013: 372).

- *Preserving autonomy*: One of the more complex and subtle, yet equally decisive tightrope-walks a successful union must master is that of balancing between a grassroots social movement capable of industrial conflict and the simultaneous ability to participate as a "social partner" in the institutional arrangements born out of such conflicts. This involves recognizing the double character of institutions as enabling and empowering, yet simultaneously constraining and producing dependencies. Thus, developing optimizing strategies for dealing with this contradictive situation of the "two faces of unionism" (Webster in Arbeitskreis Strategic Unionism 2013: 373) are paramount.

What the Jena Power Resources Approach has done is to provide us with a model that not only equips us with a differentiated approach to investigate the various power resources at a union's disposal, emphasizing associational power yet also pointing to other resources, but also acts as a bracket binding our other theoretical tools together. Travelling from classic Marxist theory pointing out the structural political economic environment workers and their unions move in (structural power) and the need to move from a class in itself to a class for itself (associational power) to the Analytical Marxists and Knight's demands for more attention paid to the micro-mechanisms creating and sustaining collective action (learning capacity, conflict capacity, framing) in order to produce rules of the game that are favorable for labor (institutional power); all of these aspects are brought together in the Jena model.

We may thus conclude, at least for the meantime, our task of assembling a theoretical toolbox providing us with the tools to guide us through our empirical data. As noted in the beginning, what may at first draw the wrath of theoretical purists screaming “eclecticism” is in fact the finely tailored assembly of the toolbox demanded by the research project at hand. Furthermore, as demonstrated above, such endeavors can be a highly fruitful undertaking – both despite as well as due to their differences.

While such a theoretical toolbox could be expanded into infinity, in the end we equally need a toolbox that is adequately equipped, but at the same time not too heavy to actually use. Thus, just as one would on a construction site, if we need other tools for a specific task, then nothing speaks against organizing those tools for that particular job. Just in that sense, readers will from time to time find other theoretical inspirations sprinkled throughout this thesis.

Now let us now enter the ethnographic scene.

Part II

Dual Transformations: Industry and Industrial Relations in Upheaval

3. Between Conflict and Cooperation: Transforming the Labor Movement

It was the day of the union's national demonstration. As if reflecting the colorful composition of the procession that was soon to commence, golden beams of sunlight blazed through the thick grey clouds that had just minutes ago unleashed a massive shower of rain onto the 15'000 construction workers and their families who had assembled to march through Zurich on that day in June. A young group of union staff manning the "sound truck" positioned at the front of the crowd were doing their best to rouse the moods of the impatient participants eager to start marching. To the surprise (and relief) of the slightly worried union organizers, the not exactly pleasant onslaught of wind and rain that had just passed did not seem to have dampened the mood. Meanwhile, more and more participants exited the nearby train station and were marshalled by union staff equipped with high visibility vests and walkie-talkies scattered along the way to the waiting procession.

Then, just before the assembled masses commenced to march across the bridge leading onto Zurich's famous Bahnhofstrasse, like a pistol at the beginning of a race, a group of ten women and men, slightly mischievous grins adorning their faces, unveiled a gigantic "Uniti siamo forti"-banner ("Together we are strong") across the bridge for all to see. After managing to untangle a last corner of the banner, they then ignited a symphony of wire-pull red smoke grenades in the background. The roughly thirty year-old worker driving the huge digger-vehicle leading the march then accelerated, his young son smiling proudly on his lap, and Los Lusitanos, a Portuguese drum band, sounded the march, thus giving the thousands waiting the cue to start walking themselves.

Embellished with thousands of flags, hand-made banners, red clapper toys and numerous props symbolizing the construction workers' struggle to defend early retirement and renew their collective labor agreement, the sea of marchers flooded the prominent Bahnhofstrasse. While the great majority were members of Unia dressed in red campaign t-shirts, workers organized in the smaller Christian union Syna were also present with their blue and white flags. After the dramatic kick-off at the beginning, the next highlight of the march came as the thousands walked past

the Paradeplatz, the prestigious banking center of Switzerland. While the banks had little to do with the direct issues of the day's march, the irony of thousands of union workers with a visible sense of collective agency walking past this icon of financial capitalism was far from lost on its subjects. This ambiguous moment was particularly relished when one of the organizers with a megaphone announced that walking past the Paradeplatz was explicitly not part of the authorized demonstration route, "[…] but we took it anyway!" Greeted with cheers, this statement seemed to further confirm the workers of their collective strength and agency.

Finally arriving at the Helvetiaplatz, where the demonstration was to conclude with speeches by activists and union leaders, the masses filled the square and gathered around a large black-colored stage with red draping. An Italian Ska band, raising clenched fists from time to time during their short intermissions between songs, entertained the first thousands of marchers who had already reached the square as thousands more poured into the arena. Following speeches by a number of other union leaders and activists, the leader of Unia's construction sector then took to the stage. To a huge round of applause, he concluded that "Those who attack retirement age 60 attack the very dignity of construction workers! […] We are ready to fight!".

Suddenly, to the surprise of the crowd, a team of seven professional climbers started to abseil down a neighboring building, drawing with them an immense, circa forty meter long banner: "Struggle together: more protection, retirement age 60, stop wage-dumping". Finally, in a choreography led by a number of worker activists on stage and accompanied by vertically pointed flame throwers ignited to the beat, the crowd started slowly clapping. Getting faster and faster, and then as fast as possible, the masses assembled then broke into a cheer and mortar-like cannons erected on stage shot out clusters of confetti scattering out into the crowd.

The scene depicted above paints a condensed picture of the June 25th demonstration of construction workers organized by Unia. Following the kick-off rally in April described in the introduction, the demonstration was the next big event in the middle of the greater campaign to renew the workers' collective labor agreement and save their early retirement scheme. It not only served the function of transporting the issues at hand into the public arena for all of the country to see, thereby building pressure on the employers of the industry, but also served as a first mass

mobilization for the workers themselves, thus upping the ante and visualizing their own collective agency as a tool to pursue their common interests. And last but not least, it fulfilled the somewhat ritualistic function of throwing down the gauntlet towards the construction employers. As reflected in the speech of the Unia leader noted above, the demonstration gave the union a space within which it could not only build up the threat of more confrontational industrial action, but also present the employers with evidence that they were capable of fulfilling that threat – in the form of 15'000 workers heeding the call of the union to take to the streets.

The scene also clearly points to the fact that we are dealing with a case of contentious, movement-oriented politics. While all of the characteristics of a classic social movement (Tarrow 2011) are hardly given considering the union's established place within the deep web of industrial and state institutions, the central role of conflict portrayed above is remarkable. It is particularly noteworthy considering that at the same time both the union and the construction employers association refer to each other as mutually recognized social partners and cooperate concretely as such on a vast number of levels. In order to understand this seemingly contradictive situation and also to make sense of where the union stands today, we must go back into time and follow the not always unilineal path the labor movement in Switzerland has travelled. While this will not only be helpful in order to understand the historical roots of today's Unia, it is also essential when seeking to explore the union's current attempts at revitalizing its associational power and the context within which this task is pursued.

Not so Humble Beginnings

Despite its internationally-held reputation as either non-existent, conservative or corporatistic, the Swiss labor movement can in fact boast a rather tough genesis. Up until the 1930s, the country's "strike culture" was no different than in any other European country in regards to strike frequency and insensitivity (Rieger 2017: 115). Tracing its roots back to a number of organizational forms and causes, organized labor's beginnings in Switzerland are in fact less to be located in large industrial manufacturing, as was often the case in other countries, but were driven by skilled craftsmen who had gradually begun to perceive their social distinction as one of belonging to a greater class of wage-earners and not only that of their respective trade (Degen 2014). While the first work stoppages in the country can be dated back

to the end of the 18th century, some with very militant aspects, workers' associations of the time were particularly concerned with the establishment of their own financial support funds for the sick and needy of their group. These funds in time expanded to what would become strike-funds, but for a long time they mostly fulfilled a function of social insurance. Looking back, the embryos of later trade unions were indeed articulated around these funds, but at the time the associations had a rather spontaneous character and were further dampened by strict laws regarding political coalitions, which only gradually changed following the birth of the new constitutional Swiss state in the European revolution year of 1848.

In the 1830s and 1840s, however, some of the first trades started to assume more stable forms of organizations, such as the watchmakers in Geneva and the typographers in Bern (Degen 2014). Some of these budding associations were influenced by socialist thought, especially transmitted by political immigrants from Germany and Italy, yet the harsh repression of the Swiss state, often in the form of mass immigrant-deportations, temporarily hampered the spread of such ideas. While the first broad worker associations were the so-called *Grütlivereine*, with a strong emphasis on self-help and education, it was the *International Workers Association* that not only consolidated the hitherto fragmented associations, but also shifted their emphasis towards collective action in the context of social conflict. In fact, in 1868 it was the construction workers of Geneva who organized the most intensive strikes the country had so far ever seen. While the International Workers Association soon fell apart again, the phenomenon nonetheless laid the seeds on both a conceptual as well as on a practical level for the construction of a broad labor movement based on the pursuit of collective interests (Degen 2014).

Significantly aided by the economic upswing of the era and the political upheavals unfolding, the turn of the 20th century saw a significant intensification of social and labor conflict. There were no less than 2'416 strikes in the period between 1880 and 1914 (Degen 2014). 193 of these were answered by police repression and 40 of them by military interventions (ibid), further strengthening the alpine country's then growingly militant reputation, even by international standards. At the same time, what would later become today's trade unions also started to take shape.

In the case of construction workers, their level of union organization was at first not very high and strikes tended to be rather spontaneous uprisings. That being said, these uprisings were occasionally of a rather grand scale. Examples of such struggles in construction are to be found in the great strike during the construction of the Gotthard Tunnel in 1875 or in Winterthur in 1909 and 1910. While difficult to pinpoint in retrospect, the rather slow and spontaneous organization of the construction workers was probably related to the high mobility in the industry as well as to linguistic barriers. That being said, a *Bricklayers and Laborers Association* (*Verband der Maurer und Handlanger*) was formed in 1897 and two decades later it merged with other construction trades in 1922 to become the far stronger *Swiss Construction and Woodworkers Association* (*Schweizerischer Bau- und Holzarbeiterverbandes*) (Vuattolo 1953). This was in general a period of consolidation for organized labor as the associations of a number of related trades joined together to form greater, more powerful unions along industry-lines.

Despite the Swiss labor movement's growing associational power through its militancy and swelling membership of what had meanwhile developed into formal trade unions, the concept of collective labor agreements (CLAs) between unions and employers was far from established. This was despite the fact that a legal article had been introduced in 1911 explicitly allowing for CLAs to be negotiated – a first taste of institutional power for the budding labor movement. In 1914, despite a high number of strikes and growing union membership, only around three to five percent of all Swiss workers fell under some sort of collective agreement between unions and employers (Rieger et al. 2016: 4). At this time, labor uprisings were to a large extent directed against the state with the goal of enhancing broader legal protections for workers (Rieger 2010: 10). The latter was, in fact, done with some success. While this may seem surprising today given Switzerland's currently liberal legal framework, the country once took on a pioneer role in the field of labor laws and regulations concerning work safety, child labor and working times (ibid). This tendency of laying demands at the doors of the state was particularly expressed during the general strike of 1918, which is arguably the most important event in the history of the Swiss labor movement.

However, due to a massive upsurge in strikes directly following the First World War and the generally unstable political atmosphere seeing socialist ideas and their

organizations assuming a growing significance, the concept of negotiating collective agreements began to become more attractive both from the perspective of organized labor as well as from that of some employers. For the unions, this meant having the opportunity to shape the working conditions of their members through direct negotiations in contrast to the broader and often smaller steps offered by state regulations. This was further encouraged by the fact that a red-menace-atmosphere was spreading and had led some of the unions to shed themselves of their more radical political elements who pursued more revolutionary goals (Degen 1987: 15f.). For some of the more open employers, while negotiations with the unions were a bitter pill to swallow, they were also looked upon more kindly than state-interventions. Furthermore, the concept of CLAs also represented an opportunity to "tame the capital-labor contradiction" and channel class conflict away from industrial action (Dörre 2010: 873). At the time, particularly the employers of the craft trades were open to the general idea of CLAs and what would later become "social partnership". This was, of course, not a gesture of goodwill, but a rational calculation of the kind described by Knight and some of the Analytical Marxists: If the benefits of integrating organized labor and thus constraining the activities of the latter outweigh the costs of the concessions involved, then it is rational to do so.

Yet despite the gradual and very selective openness of certain employers, many at the time continued to vigorously resist the idea of any kind of agreement and were generally wary of even giving unions any kind of formal recognition as a legitimate actor in industrial relations. Particularly in construction as well as in the machine-building industry, employers were far from enthusiastic about what they saw as shackling themselves to the very organizations that had so far primarily been concerned with calling for strikes and other forms of militant action. As a result, by 1929 only five to eight percent of workers had the protection of a collective agreement (Rieger 2010: 10). As can be expected, the economic situation after the crash of 1929 and the thus simultaneous weakening of labors structural power did not necessarily make things easier.

However, the economic recovery after 1935 on the one hand (Rieger 2010: 10) as well as the growing spread of fascism throughout Europe on the other (Degen 2014), steadily accompanied by a continuously growing labor movement, reshuffled the cards on both sides. While the healing economic situation encouraged unions to

demand and aggressively strike for higher wages and other concessions, at the same time the fascist threat moderated their long-term goals of greater structural change. On the side of employers, the situation of the day prompted many to consider collective agreements as an instrument of both political and economic stability – giving in to certain concessions, but simultaneously preventing greater social strife from producing even greater threats to capital accumulation.

It was around this time that two major agreements were signed that would carry with them major significance for future industrial relations in Switzerland, both firmly establishing the concept of CLAs as an established institution and beginning to integrate the unions into mainstream political and civil society. That being said, each represented a very different understanding of the essence of a collective labor agreement and thus simultaneously cleared the way for somewhat different traditions of social partnership to develop.

In mid-July of 1937, after years of labor militancy in the machine-manufacturing industry and a very real strike threat in Winterthur just weeks beforehand, the Swiss Metalworkers and Watchmakers Association, which would decades later become part of Unia, signed a so-called “Peace Agreement” with the employers of the industry (Degen 1987). As one of the largest sectors of the economy at the time, and one that had long refused to recognize organized labor, this was a significant event. However, while the signing of the agreement per se involved a recognition of the union as a legitimate negotiating partner and as such must be attributed its historical significance, on a material level the agreement did nothing besides cementing industrial peace by constraining the union of its ability to strike (Degen 1987; Rieger 2010). By establishing a complex, multilevel system of dispute-resolution and at the same time failing to introduce any normative regulations on wages, working times or general conditions, the agreement represented a rather one-sided institutional constraint of organized labor (Degen 1987). As such, due to these missing normative regulations, the agreement was in fact at the time not even broadly recognized as an “actual CLA”, but was simply known as the “Agreement” and later the “Peace Agreement” (Degen 1987: 18). While it was in later years expanded to include normative regulations on working conditions, the agreement nonetheless gave birth to what came to be known as “absolute industrial peace” and indeed became the bedrock for “mythologizing” a tradition of controlled industrial peace and backroom

negotiations in contrast to movement-oriented collective bargaining involving industrial action (Degen 1987).

In stark contrast to this “Peace Agreement”, both from a historical perspective as well as noticed at the time, a second watershed moment emerged (ibid). This time, it was at the center of the industrial home of this thesis: construction. Following a wave of fierce strikes on construction sites throughout the country, a *Landesmantelvertrag* (LMV) or “National Framework Agreement” for the entire main construction trades was signed on May 18th, 1938. Materially as well as symbolically, the agreement differed strongly from the above noted peace agreement. In marked contrast to the machine-manufacturing industry, construction’s CLA did not place conflict resolution at its center, but was primarily based on normative regulations concerning working conditions, wages and working times. In fact, it did not even contain an absolute peace clause constraining all strikes until years later in 1958, at the ensuing height of the Cold War.

While the material standards of construction’s new agreement were modest from today’s perspective (it included a 48h week among other things), at the time the CLA not only represented a great material step forward, but also one associated with the logic of collective action as a key leverage mechanism for social and economic change. Despite the fact that an absolute industrial peace clause was later added to the agreement in exchange for material concessions, construction’s CLA nonetheless laid the historical groundwork for a different, less corporatistic approach to industrial relations than that in the machine-manufacturing industry. Given the size and meaning of the industry in question, the significance of the CLA radiated far beyond construction. Around this time, a number of other collective agreements were negotiated as well, raising the percentage of workers covered by a CLA to 25 percent in 1938 (Rieger 2010: 10).

Despite their different approaches and ideologies, however, both agreements played their part in mainstreaming the general idea of collective agreements between trade unions and employers. This concept was further consolidated following a “second wave of collective labor agreements“ (Rieger 2010: 11) born out of a huge upsurge in strikes towards and after the end of World War II. Representing the largest work stoppages since 1918 (Rieger 2010: 11), the post-war years saw an average of 33

strikes per year with thousands of participants (Rieger 2017: 116). These industrial conflicts led to further concessions in already existing agreements on the one hand and the establishment of new agreements in previously untapped industries on the other (such as pharmaceuticals). By 1950, around fifty percent of all workers in Switzerland fell under some sort of collective agreement (Rieger 2010: 11). This proportion was double that of before the war and has in fact remained rather stable ever since.

Besides these developments on an industry-level, the state also started to step in more closely. As mentioned above, previous turbulences in the political economic arena had encouraged the introduction of legislature giving collective agreements a legal base as of 1911 in the Swiss Code of Obligations (*Obligationenrecht*). In retrospect, it represented a first step towards a broader institutionalization of a system of social partnership by providing the necessary legal space for it to unfold. In 1947, however, the state went a significant step further. It introduced a new article in Switzerland's constitution making it legally possible for the *Bundesrat*, the country's national executive, to declare certain CLAs as *allgemeinverbindlich*, or legally binding for all.

Up until now, a collective agreement was negotiated and signed by the unions on the one hand and by the relevant employers association on the other. In our case, that would have been the Swiss Wood- and Construction Workers Association and the Swiss Construction Employers Association. This meant, however, that while the agreements may have been national ones, the terms thereof were only binding for the contract partners signing the agreement. As a result, they were not relevant for companies that were not members of the employers association. By constructing the legal possibility for the terms of CLAs to be deemed legally binding for all companies of the concerned industry, even if they were not members of the signing employers association, this represented an unprecedented intervention by the state into the industrial relations of the country. It was, of course, also new institutional power that had arisen as an indirect product of conflicts fought out beforehand, in turn helping to expand organized labor's influence even more.

While the widening of CLA-coverage to fifty percent of workers by 1950 was a direct result of the massive post-war strike waves mentioned above, the introduction of this

new legislature of course also played its part by expanding the reach of already existing agreements. By October 1948, 1'349 CLAs had been declared generally binding for a total of 32'009 companies and 82'398 employees (Schweizerischer Arbeitgeberverband 2009a: 149).

As can be imagined, such a fundamental constitutional change did not go without opposition, especially from those companies that were not part of any employers association and now saw their ability to determine their workers' conditions of employment significantly constrained. In order to respect these "minority interests", the declaration of a collective agreement as generally binding was only to be given if a certain set of quotas were fulfilled. This meant that the majority of companies had to be organized in the employers association, the majority of workers had to be employed in these companies and finally that the majority of employees had to be organized in a labor union that was part of the CLA[7].

While the interest of the unions towards the idea of strengthening the system of CLA's and simultaneously widening their reach, thus boosting labor's influence as well as raising the potential to recruit new members, is understandable, the new system's acceptance by employers and their conservative political allies may come as a slightly bigger surprise. This can, however, be just as rationally explained when embedded in the political economy of the time and the budding system of social partnership. The reasoning behind it is threefold.

First of all, after the defeat of fascism in Europe and in the context of strong unions and a growingly influential political left (Schiavi and Brassel 1987), the project of integrating the latter two into the folds of mainstream society had grown in acceptance in the conservative camp. On the one hand, this followed the basic logic that when organized labor is powerful enough to represent a real threat to the accumulation of capital, yet is at the same time itself ready to enter into a dynamic of negotiation and compromise (and does not pursue more revolutionary goals), then it can be a sensible path for employers and the state to integrate a potentially dangerous insurgency, despite the material costs of the concessions involved. On the other hand, in the context of the unfolding Cold War, which was not only

[7] Since the signing of the Bilateral Agreements with the European Union in 1999, as part of the so-called *flanking measures* to protect Swiss wages and working conditions, the above-mentioned quotas have become more flexible, making it easier to declare the terms of certain CLAs generally binding.

expressed along the lines of an arms race but also as one for people's hearts and minds by guaranteeing economic prosperity, this stance of integration and mutual recognition and legitimacy seemed more rational on both an economic as well as a wider political level than one of continued social conflict.

When suggesting that in democratic capitalist societies the ruling order can be upheld not merely through physical force, but also through "real compromises involving real concessions" (Wright 2000: 999), Antonio Gramsci's thoughts come to mind. Despite widening the sphere of Marxist thoughts further onto the discursive plain, Gramsci's concept of hegemony is nonetheless a dialectically material one. For it emphasizes that such compromises are not simply a given, nor are they a purely deliberate strategy developed in some back room, but a contradictive process arising from "the specific configurations of power and interests that characterize the relationship between the capitalist class and the working class" (Wright 2000: 999).

Similar thoughts are expressed in Burawoy's *Manufacturing Consent. Changes in the Labor Process Under Monopoly Capitalism* (1979), discussed in our theory chapter. What Burawoy points out, and something that is just as relevant in our case, is that such hegemonial strategies will only be pursued if not only the political conditions and power relations encourage it, but also if the economy allows for class compromises to be introduced without impeding too severely on companies' profits. It is thus vital to emphasize that the above integration of the Swiss labor movement was simultaneously embedded in a seemingly infinite economic boom era of the postwar years, the "30 glorious years" as former Swiss labor leader Vasco Pedrina (2012) put it. In this time, the country experienced a remarkably strong growth of its gross domestic product, hovering around five to seven percent (Rieger 2017: 116). Besides giving employers the necessary economic leeway, it also gave the union movement, next to its strong position of associational power at the time, a strong structural one as well since capital had an unquenched thirst for labor power at the time. Of course, in exchange for this new place in mainstream society, both the political Social Democrats and the union movement were expected to drop their more radical demands and in the particular case of the latter, adhere to absolute industrial peace.

The second mechanism behind many employers' openness towards a strengthening of the system of social partnership, in particular in regards to the newly introduced legal base allowing CLAs to become generally binding, had a very direct and rational economic base. This particularly concerned industries that already had a CLA and were searching for an institutional path to ensure they would not suffer therefrom at the benefit of their competition. In fact, precisely because the possibility of the state to declare a CLA as legally binding had such a profound (and for some employers beneficial) effect on the greater market situation, some of the stronger voices supporting this constitutional change did not, in fact, hail from organized labor, but from the side of employers.

Ideological prejudice laid aside, the material logic behind such a stance is rather simple. From a purely economic and institutionalist perspective, if employers A, B and C have signed a collective labor agreement constraining their ability to shape their workers' wages and employment conditions, then in the rationale of a market economy they will equally demand that employer D and E adhere to the same conditions. For if A, B and C pay higher wages for lower working hours, then they can, if not otherwise compensated, quickly land in a less competitive position to D and E. However, if all companies adhere to the conditions of the signed CLA, then none of them can oust the other from the market through "unfair competition". It is in this sense that working-class associational power can under circumstances, as will become particularly evident in the next chapter, even play a central role in solving capital's own collective action problems, thus making agreements "much more durable than when they emerge simply from capacity of workers to impose costs on capitalists." (Wright 2000: 999).

So, while "in conventional wisdom, capitalist-class interests are best satisfied when the working class is highly disorganized" and this is true to a certain extent, as soon as organized labor has increased its associational power to a certain extent, thus crossing a certain threshold, working class power can in some cases have "positive effects on [certain] capitalists' interests." (Wright 2000: 95f.). That being said, from an employer point of view it is the protagonists of Burawoy's monopoly capitalism who will tend to particularly profit from such an institutionalization of collective bargaining and binding rules, as due to their size and productivity they are in a better position to cushion the concessions made. From an empirical perspective, it is thus of no

surprise that it was (and still is) especially the larger companies who supported and continue to support the declaration of CLAs as legally binding.

A third point, and less a driving motivation than a discursive articulation of the above, was and continues to be employers' portrayal of this newly erected system of social partnership as an "independent Swiss answer to interest conflicts between employers and employees" (Schweizerischer Arbeitgeberverband 2009b: 170). Interestingly enough, while the normative constraints of a collective labor agreement are, next to already existing laws and institutions, clearly a strong intervention into the free market economy, strong voices within the wider employer community have in fact come to depict it as precisely the opposite. For while the state lends its support by declaring certain CLAs legally binding, the system of social partnership, as depicted by the employers involved, allows for a particularly liberal legal environment.

This is, so the argument goes, because the social partners of the industry, i.e. the employers and the unions, are free from any outside intervention by a third party, i.e. the state, and are given the necessary space to develop their own institutional rulebooks according to the supposed needs and realities of the particular industry. It is this ideological flexibility that, in the eyes of the employers, makes their position within the system of social partnership compatible with a broader ideology of economic liberalism that would otherwise shun any such strikingly profound interventions into both the scope of action of single companies as well as the market in general. Unsurprisingly, such a narrative disregards any reference to power asymmetries and is often strongly and explicitly connected to absolute industrial peace as well as sometimes even the specific "Peace Agreement" of 1937 (Schweizerischer Arbeitgeberverband 2009b: 170).

So, while the players involved had very different motivations and interests concerning this system, Switzerland had, in the eyes of the unions, organized employers and the state, become "the country of "social partnership"" (Rieger 2010: 12). All of the above display a strong case of dialectic interplay between power relations, the political economy and ideological constructions arising from the former. It also underlines the fact that while social institutions might be a product of colliding interests and are often born out of direct social conflict, they may nonetheless develop in an unexpected and sometimes unintended way (Knight 1992). As such, while originally arising from the

labor movement's associational power and fierce industrial conflict, the pre- and post-war years saw a relatively stable and mutually accepted system of social partnership come to be established as an institution of collective bargaining.

The newly acquired legitimacy of these previous labor insurgents did, however, come at a price. By now, practically all collective labor agreements contained strict clauses concerning absolute industrial peace, which were expected to be upheld in both a practical as well as political sense. Thus, the instrument of the strike was just as much discursively banished as it was legally and practically. A strong "myth of industrial peace" (Degen 1987: Schiavi and Brassel 1987) had been constructed, suggesting that the country's economic prosperity was a direct result of this industrial peace and that strikes and industrial conflict in general only served to damage the Swiss economy's "reputation of reliability" (Rieger 2017: 117). Those propagating this position, both employers and union leaders alike as well as the state, pointed to the fact that at the time unions were indeed able to gain concessions without having to resort to industrial action (ibid). While this may have started as a myth in the sense of a false or politically construed analysis, it nonetheless in time came to shape reality in the sense that slowly but surely even the idea of a strike became a thing of the past for many of the now firmly integrated unions. As a result, it even became a false but popularly held belief that it was in fact illegal to strike in Switzerland (Pedrina and Hartmann 2007: 90).

According to Knight, "such constraints [on strike action] seem to work to the benefit of employers." (1992: 205). By assuring "that workers will be unable to choose to strike during the contract period, the constraint diminishes the worker's overall bargaining power." (ibid). That being said, at a time when employers seemed wedded to the idea of social partnership and were regularly granting concessions at the negotiating table, such cautions remained relatively abstract and moot warnings. Why evoke unnecessary and costly conflict, when the model of "economic boom unionism" (Oesch 2011: 94) was working? Going even further, if mobilizations are not needed anymore, why invest the effort in upholding the networks of activists necessary for carrying them out?

So, despite continuing to recruit members and thus maintaining a high degree of "paying union membership" (Arbeitskreis Strategic Unionism 2013: 354), far less

effort was put into strengthening and renewing an active union membership at a grassroots level, let alone in the form of collective mobilizations. In a process seen throughout Western Europe and the United States, the unions had to a certain extent mutated from *activating* movements of the working class into bureaucratic organizations *representing* the working class; going from social movements with activist participation to service suppliers where fulltime staff were the driving force (Kelley 2017). As Dörre reveals, the more institutionally powerful the unions had grown in the postwar era, the more they themselves underwent a process of change (2010: 882f.). However, while this process did unfold in a number of Western countries, the utter strength of this "myth of industrial peace" was indeed unique to Switzerland (Rieger 2017).

All this being said, it would be unwise to assume that either side had suddenly developed a disregard for their own respective interests. As such, the concerns that employers expressed in 1948, directly following the postwar strike wave, that despite their strategic benefits, collective labor agreements are nonetheless "binding for a long period of time despite the fact that economic conditions may change" (Schweizerischer Arbeitgeberverband 2009a: 149), were far from gone. They were, in hindsight, perhaps simply muted by the concrete political economic situation of the place and time. So, far from any historical infinity, as institutions and institutional power seldom display, this heyday of welfare capitalism and industrial peace had an expiration date.

Of Crisis, Renaissance and Revitalization

Despite the fact that it only covered around half of the workers of the country, the system of established social partnership rapidly gained a position of legitimacy and was portrayed by both unions and employers as the mutually beneficial "Swiss" way. In construction as well, the unions managed over the years to reduce working times, raise the number of paid vacation days and gain other achievements at the negotiation table without the threat or actual calling of strikes. The unprecedented economic upswing of this "golden age" (Deppe 2012: 23), accompanied by a broad radiance of CLA-achievements even into CLA-free industries, allowed for a never-before-seen prosperity across the economy (Rieger 2010: 11f.). From 1953 on, Switzerland's economy was characterized by a sustained upswing lasting over twenty years.

Yet if we accept that within the capitalist mode of production, economic upswings can only go so far and crises are an inherent part of the "enigma of capital" (Harvey 2011), then the writing was on the wall. In 1973, a first turbulence hit in form of the first oil crisis, sending shock waves throughout the global capitalist economy and leading to a deep recession and mass lay-offs in a number of industries. The economy temporarily recovered, yet was hit again in 1980 into 1981, leading again to more mass dismissals and shattering anew any hitherto held illusion of indefinite economic prosperity.

While from today's perspective it may seem surprising, but at this time the system of collective labor agreements remained remarkably stable. From the perspective of organized labor, these platforms of collective bargaining were more needed and valuable than ever before as they protected already gained achievements in an increasingly instable economic environment. From the perspective of the employers, still the generation retaining a collective memory of previously unstable political times, they neither had much interest in dismantling CLAs as they saw them as a stabilizing instrument, especially in such turbulent times (Rieger 2010: 12).

That being said, these ruptures in economic-boom capitalism and the mass dismissals they produced did lead to debates within some parts of the labor movement about the future of industrial relations. While industrial peace clauses were still a central and generally unquestioned part of social partnership, both from a political standpoint as well as from a contractual one, first discussions unfolded about the question of an *absolute* versus a *relative* industrial peace. While the former, which by this time was an inherent part of almost all collective agreements, meant that strikes were a priori forbidden as long as a collective agreement was in place, the latter suggested that strikes were legitimate as long as they did not concern anything already negotiated in the standing agreement (such as already defined minimum wages or working times).

Not necessarily surprisingly, these at the time still superficial discussions particularly took place in the Construction and Wood Union (*Gewerkschaft Bau und Holz*, GBH), which was the successor organization of the union that had negotiated the first collective agreement for construction in 1938. That being said, at this point in time strikes were just as rare in construction as in any other industry and construction's

CLA was repeatedly renewed at the bargaining table and without the accompaniment of industrial action. In fact, despite the shaky economic situation, the construction employers continued to grant concessions throughout the 1980s, when a number of advances were made in questions of minimum wages, working hours and paid vacation time.

The length and depth of the economic recession of the 1990s, however, mixed with a newly arising political climate, finally rocked social partnership's hitherto remarkable stability. As Knight emphasizes, social institutions only exist in their actual state and form as long as the players involved perceive them as beneficial (1992: 207). And now, for the first real time since its broader institutionalization in the postwar-era, the system of collective labor agreements was effectively called into question (Vatter 2016: 184f.). While at the time this came as a strong surprise to many in the union movement, looking back, both at these years as well as at the deeper history of industrial capitalism, it is perhaps more astonishing how long the "exception" of welfare capitalism (Boron 2010) and harmonious social partnership actually lasted.

Embedded in a far deeper "great transformation" of growing neoliberal hegemony (Deppe 2012: 14), the background of this crisis of social partnership was twofold. On an economic level, the 1990s were hit by one of the deepest recessions since the end of the Second World War. Collapsing markets and global structural changes had led not only to a rupture in the process of capital accumulation, but also to the highest mass unemployment of the post-war times (Rieger 2010: 12). The era of endless growth and prosperity in postwar capitalism had vividly come to its end. As a result thereof, the leeway of employers to grant or even maintain already given concessions without at the same time sacrificing profits was drastically reduced. Entangled in an environment of increasingly sharp competition and falling profits, both on a local as well as increasingly global scale, employers' hitherto allegiance to the system of social partnership with its job security, guaranteed minimum wages, regular pay raises and caps on working time suddenly seemed far less rational (Dörre 2010).

On a political level, the articulation of this great transformation was no less dramatic. By the 1990s, the Keynesian political economic principles of welfare capitalism, whether shaped in a Social Democratic or liberal corporatist way, had rapidly lost

ground to a growing hegemony of neoliberal thought. In place of Fordist job security, steadily progressing and regulated wages and guaranteed social welfare, there came the “recommodification” of labor relations (Standing 2007), the privatization of public goods and the general shifting of “responsibility” from the collective to the individual sphere. Displacing to a large extent any empirical facts questioning this shift, a mystification of what Stiglitz calls “market fundamentalism” swept the ideological arena (in Durrenberger 2005: 129). Touching all corners of social and political life, a new formation of capitalism was being born. It was, in the words of David Harvey, a “re-empowerment” of capital (2011: 131).

In Switzerland, this global transformation hit with slight delay, yet the effects thereof were felt just as hard. They were particularly swift and strong in the area of social partnership (Mach and Oesch 2003). Going hand in hand with the above noted political change, the old generation of corporatist “patrons”, socialized in the postwar-era of welfare capitalism and who had headed the various employers associations since the 1940s, were being replaced by a younger generation of “Chicago-Boys” (Pedrina and Hartmann 2007: 88). Trained in Stiglitz’ “market fundamentalism” and with little experience or interest in social dialogue, they largely perceived the unions as unnecessary baggage. Furthermore, whereas in the pre- and postwar-eras center-right liberals had historically dominated the various employers’ associations, large parts of the new generation now associated themselves with the far right Swiss Peoples’ Party (ibid).

In this changing atmosphere, a number of employers called for a general “co-ordinated elimination of excessive regulation” (Mach in Oesch 2011: 89), both on the level of legal protection concerning such things as maximum working hours and night shifts, yet also on that of social partnership. Guido Richterich, then president of the trans-industrial Swiss Employers Association, even demanded the abolishment of the constitutional article making collective labor agreements legally binding, portraying it as an illegitimate intervention into the markets (Oesch 2011). What had for decades been presented as an indestructible and taken for granted pillar of Swiss society was now fundamentally up for debate.

That being said, while some employers effectively attempted to rid themselves of the constraints of collective labor agreements in general, particularly in the printing and

media industries, this was not necessarily a homogeneous wave and some employers far more sought to selectively pick the cherries of social partnership. This can on the one hand be attributed to the general social phenomenon that institutional arrangements are often surprisingly durable (Knight 1992; Arbeitskreis Strategic Unionism 2013) and those born in one era can indeed "constrain future policy options" (Kelly 1998: 13), but also because some employers saw it in their own rational interests to maintain certain instruments of the system. So, instead of seeking to overthrow the entire concept of CLAs, a number of employers preferred to keep the general notion of social partnership, in particular its element of industrial peace, yet fundamentally flexibilize normative regulations concerning wages, working times, etc. In other words, the spirit of the narrow "peace agreement" of 1937 was taken out of the closet of history. After decades of a remarkably stable "social pact", balancing out the interests of capital and labor (Pedrina and Hartmann 2007: 87), the rules of the game were being fundamentally challenged.

Due to the structure and workings of the construction industry, namely that of a highly mobile sector with low entrance barriers to new competition, the articulation of these developments was slightly different. Since, as will be elaborated upon in the next chapter, especially the larger employers had a rational economic interest in retaining central regulations of the CLA, not least in order to tame "unfair" competition from driving them from the market, an abolishment of the legally binding collective labor agreement was at the time not seriously debated. What was called into question, however, were the particular contents of the agreement. This was, almost from one day to another, visibly expressed in the fact that in 1991 the pay raise was for the first time in years under the inflation rate and in 1992 employers went a step further and called for an abolishment of the 13th month's salary as well as other parts of the CLA. While in the end a deal was struck and the 13th month's salary was retained, it clearly characterized the new rules of the game.

Following decades of corporatist industrial peace, these developments caught the unions completely off-guard (Oesch 2011: 82). Far from igniting the spark that would unleash a revolt against this harsh employer offensive, the union movement was paralyzed (Pedrina and Hartmann 2007: 90). As Hicks points out, "Weapons grow rusty if unused, and a union which never strikes may lose the ability to organize a formidable strike, […]" (Hicks in Coppola 2011: 11). In fact, besides collective

memories of a strike-culture having all but disappeared, the movement effectively lacked organizers and activists with any real experience in coordinating and leading industrial action. The strike had, in fact, slipped from the movement's *repertoire of contention* (Tilly and Tarrow 2007). It had been become unlearnt. In hindsight, it is actually astonishing how a historically speaking relatively short era of industrial peace can in fact so severely rob a union of its mobilization ability, pointing again to the very real challenges in maintaining collective action as soon as a certain dynamic is interrupted.

So, while the system of social partnership was not dead, if the unions wanted to be more than just a symbolic junior partner in an arrangement of "fake corporatism" (Pelizzari and Schief 2007), then they would have to fundamentally reinvent themselves and their way of functioning. It is in this sense that two parallel developments within the union movement provided the necessary air for such a discussion to not only breath and pick up on already existing debates concerning a "relative industrial peace", but also for the ideas forged within these debates to flow into reality and be put into practice (Kelley 2012).

The first of these developments was in fact not born in the traditional labor movement, but outside of it, namely in the remnants of the New Left of the 1970s and 1980s and in particular in the remaining structures of the Trotskyist *Socialist Workers Party* (*Sozialistische Arbeiterpartei, SAP*). What characterized this small, yet disciplined and active group of activists was not only the more typical leftwing approach criticizing a bureaucratization of the labor movement, but also, in marked contrast to other fringe groups of the time, a strategic decision to actively work within the formal structures of the union with the strategic goal of revitalizing the labor movement. Many of the discussions and debates surrounding this proposed revitalization of the labor movement were published in the political magazine *Diskussion*, which appeared three times a year and whose editorial board was made up among others of future Unia co-president Andreas Rieger.

As their target of *entryism*[8], the majority of these activists joined the Construction and Industrial Union (*Gewerkschaft Bau und Industrie, GBI*), the latest merger product of organized labor in construction. Particularly when compared to other radical

[8] The strategy of „entering" into already existing mass labor organizations in order to influence their program and tactics, often used by Trotskyist groups, is known as *entryism*.

organizations attempting to enter into mass organizations and influence the latter's agenda, the activists of the Socialist Workers Party and the broader New Left were remarkably successful. Not only managing to fill staff and organizer positions throughout the union, they rapidly moved into leadership positions.

Looking back at those years, one of the former activists, still in a regional leadership position, recounted some of his experiences to me during my fieldwork:

> We were disciplined, we were passionate, well actually we were downright obsessed with seizing this opportunity to actually bring about change in the labor movement and lead the unions back into a more conflict-ready place. What made our task both so absolutely necessary, but at the same time relatively easy, was that the union was just so gutted. Nobody really wanted to work for the union then and the ones that did were pretty much good for nothing. So, even when the then union leadership did have issues with our politics, if they even knew about them, they just did not care that much because where else would they find active and eager guys that were willing to put in the effort and the hours that we did?

The fact that these radical activists chose the construction union as the preferred organization within which to become active was of no coincidence. Besides its more militant historical reputation going back to the pre-war years, especially when contrasted to that of the more conservative Metalworkers and Watchmakers Association that had signed the 1937 Peace Agreement, there was also another reason leading them to conclude it to be most fruitful to concentrate their efforts on construction. This equally brings us to the second of the two developments providing the necessary conditions for a practice-oriented debate of union revitalization.

As noted above, despite its historically militant reputation, construction's system of social partnership was in reality by now just as much characterized by the institution of industrial peace as were other industries. As such, ideas of militant labor activism and strikes largely continued to exist in name only, as the historical legacy of days gone by. That being said, when discussions thereof again started to become reality, they were nonetheless particularly well received by large parts of construction's immigrant workforce of the day[9]. Largely having immigrated from Italy and Spain, at

[9] Despite today's leftwing postions of the unions and the large proportion of the workforce made up of immigrant workers, the latter had for a long time been banished to the margins of the formal structures

first as temporary *Saisonnier*-workers, many had to a certain extent been socialized in relatively conscious working class cultures and traditions of political and labor activism (Steinauer and Von Allmen 2000; Frigerio and Merhar 2004). It was thus not uncommon at the time for many of these workers to be involved in politically-tinted social clubs and a number were even active members in the Communist Parties of their respective homeland, in particular the then relatively strong *Partido Comunista Italiano* (PCI). Far from confirming any crude construction worker stereotypes of Bibliophobia, some of these workers devoted large parts of their free time to reading and debating complex political literature.

Proudly reciting anecdotes of his political coming of age before migrating to Switzerland, Emilio, one of these Italian worker activists, who has recently retired but remains active in the union, recounted to me how: “You know, we were all communists back then.” Removing a yellowed and slightly torn newspaper article from an old tin box, he continued: “See, this is an article about when I was a teenager in a small town in Sicily in the 1960s. The fascists wanted to march through our neighborhood. So we waited until they got to a narrow crossing and then ambushed them.” Now broadly smiling and dewy-eyed, he recounted how: “All of the working class kids from the neighborhood took part in that. And we all emigrated in later years. Almost all of my friends at some point or another worked construction in Switzerland. Exciting times…”

While a certain nostalgic aspect of these “exciting times” probably plays a strong role both in the memories of union organizers and worker activists, if even a portion thereof have an empirical base then it was a rare gift for any union activists seeking to bring the movement back into a “more conflict-ready place”. Thus, in cooperation with a number of other activists like Emilio, the meanwhile established new generation of union staff and leaders started to implement significant changes in the labor movement and unleash a profound process of transformation.

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of the unions. Either looked down upon or simply not trusted, especially in the red-scare period of the Cold War, it was paradoxically enough the socialist-oriented unions that took the longest to finally open up to immigrants taking up more influential positions in the 1960s and 1970s (Steinauer and Von Allmen 2000).

Pushing for more emphasis on campaigning and mobilizing workers into collective action, the new generation had more than its fair share of work ahead of themselves. As noted above, despite a pool of somewhat politicized workers in construction, due to the missing role of any real type of mobilizations in the years beforehand, the union had largely ceased to even invest the necessary time, effort and resources into maintaining the formal and informal structures necessary for widespread collective action. It was these structures as well as a general “culture of solidarity“ (Fantasia 1988) that the union now sought to rebuild. In other words, a tradition of contentious labor activism was to be reinvented.

As early as 1992, some of the first construction site mobilizations aimed at enhancing the union’s bargaining power during contract negotiations began to be realized. While generally modest in comparison to the intensity of the “old days” as well as to what would soon come, it nonetheless represented a paradigm change as contentious mobilizations re-entered the stage of the construction industry. In the following years the union organized more and continuously growing collective actions, both on the construction sites themselves as well as disruptive actions in the wider public sphere, such as in front of the construction employers association’s delegates assembly in 1994.

This return of industrial skirmishes to the landscape of industrial relations in Switzerland was equally visible on the institutional level. In what represented a product of skilled lobbying with their social democrat allies in parliament, in 1999 the union managed to formally and explicitly introduce a “right to strike” to the new constitution of Switzerland. The instrument of the strike was thus given the highest possible form of political legitimacy. While the strike had not been illegal before, this explicit mention was nonetheless a new symbolic quality (Rieger 2017). It also points to the hybrid character of this reviving labor movement, with one foot once again dipping in the water of contentious politics and the other remaining firmly embedded in institutional politics.

When placed in the context of industrial peace, the glowing tinder of these first mobilizations also revealed something else, especially in the eyes of the new, more combative union leadership. While the formal industrial peace clauses embedded in almost all collective labor agreements hamper a union’s ability to call strikes, both in

a legal and discursive way as well as in the field, the legal consequences thereof can under certain circumstances “take a backseat“ (Pedrina and Hartmann 2007: 93) and simply become less important. This is especially the case when employers are perceived as having broken some kind of “moral economy“ (Thompson 1966; 1971) of basic rules and decencies and a strike is seen as being particularly legitimate despite institutional constraints.

All this being said, however, it is important to emphasize that this return to conflict was not an absolute or exclusive one, but a rather pragmatically dialectic one. The element of industrial conflict was thus not brought back with the idea of *replacing* the system of social partnership, but as one to be *embedded within* it. For although the unions sought to bring contentious mobilizations back into the world of industrial relations, they consciously did so within the existing institutions of the CLA (with the relative exception of stretching the principle of absolute industrial peace). As such, not only did regular negotiations and bipartisan inspections of working conditions continue, but when the construction industry’s crisis of the mid-1990s hit, the “social partners” actively worked together to push among other things for more public investments in infrastructure and thus stimulate the construction economy.

While the construction union continued to use the annual wage negotiations as well as the renewal periods of the CLA (usually every three years) as platforms upon which to continuously rebuild a culture of labor militancy and redevelop their own skills at organizing broad mobilizations, the leadership came to the conclusion that something more, something bigger was needed. After broad debates and deep discussions within the union, a “grand issue”, as one union leader of the time put it to me, was found. At a time when conservatives, liberals and employers were demanding the general retirement age to be raised, the union would demand the lowering of retirement age for construction workers from 65 to 60. Besides representing a potentially huge step forward for the workers themselves, it equally represented an ambitious project upon which the union could rebuild itself.

Lasting a number of years, the campaign for early retirement was a comprehensive one taking on a number of forms. The union used it to organize colorful demonstrations activating workers, to carry out disruptive actions calling industrial peace into question and finally as a public campaign to gain sympathy for the cause

of labor. The latter point, aimed at enhancing the union's societal power, included the publication of a lengthy study allocating the deteriorating health conditions of construction workers in their 60s. As such, the campaign not only reached construction workers on a very practical as well as emotional level, but managed to gain the blessing of large parts of the general public as well.

As a result of these efforts, the issue was seriously negotiated between the union and the employers. In fact, in the spring of 2002, it seemed like a compromise had been found. Soon thereafter, however, the employers retracted an already negotiated agreement, thus not only robbing the workers of their chance at early retirement, but simultaneously breaking the rules of the above mentioned "moral economy" (Thompson 1966; 1971). It was now that the union leadership saw its real chance.

After formally deciding upon industrial action at a delegates assembly in September, the campaign culminated into what was to be the most intensive industrial action the country had seen in decades. On November 4th, 2002, ten thousand construction workers went on strike. The climax of the strike occurred in the German-speaking part of Switzerland, where striking workers blocked a main Autobahn at the *Baregg-Tunnel*, causing mass disruption and thus immense public pressure on the construction employers association. A few days after the strike, the employers conceded. An agreement was signed and early retirement at the age of 60 was implemented starting the following year. This new institution was to be financed to 80% by employer dues (four percent of all wages of the company) and to 20% by employee dues (one percent of their wages).

The momentum of this historical, water-shed moment was felt on a number of levels. Within the construction union, it was a strong sign that not only was change possible, but that the strategy of renewing the union through contentious mobilizations was working. Within the wider federation of unions, the idea of rebuilding a social-movement-oriented, conflict-ready labor movement had been "proven in the field", as one labor leader told phrased it. These discussions even reached the Swiss Metalworkers and Watchmakers Association, long considered as more conservative and dominated by corporatist thought. And finally in the public sphere, where strikes were largely seen as either residues of bygone days or even hostile assertions of particular interests, the strike gained new recognition (Pedrina and Hartmann 2007).

Indeed, after decades of industrial peace, construction's strike for early retirement represented a "rehabilitation of strikes" (Oesch 2011: 94) both inside and outside the labor movement.

On a more personal level, the strike also touched the emotions of many workers in a remarkable manner. Looking back at his own participation in the strike, construction worker Antonio recalled how:

> It was a weird feeling. We were really doing the unthinkable. Not only did we refuse to work and had gather together with other workers from all over Switzerland, we were actually blocking a highway! Cars beeping everywhere… And then we just spontaneously ran through the tunnel to meet the other striking workers on the other side. Over a kilometer long! I remember hugging people on the other side. And we didn't even know we were going to win then! At the time, it seemed like we had already won just by doing what we were doing, just by the fact that we were fighting together! That was enough for us at the moment.
>
> A few days later, I was back on the construction site, back to everyday life, and the radio was on. Then they announced it, right there on the radio: We had won, the employers had given in. I started to cry. Right there in front of my colleagues on the construction site. I started to cry.

Besides this uplifting spirit and the individual as well as collective experiences gathered during the mobilizations leading up to 2002, in order to seriously rebuild labor's associational power in an increasingly hostile environment, such an endeavor also required an organizational consolidation. This was needed in order to provide the necessary size, framework, resources and clout. It would, in the long run, be especially important if the union movement was to not only consolidate its power in its traditional bastions, but also expand to the growing service sector, which largely represented a "union desert". It was into this ambiguous atmosphere that a new name was born: Unia.

The New Union in Town

The pictures and videos of Unia's founding congress in Basel in 2004 symbolically visualized what the new organization aspired to be: big, loud, extravagant and full of activist members devoting their time and effort to "their" union movement. Massive red banners decorating both the inside and outside of the building, fireworks and

confetti blasting across the stage and combative speeches were the defining moments. However, reflecting not only its movement-oriented stance, but also the union's nonetheless still solid place in the established institutions of social partnership and politics, a prestigious visit by a member of the *Bundesrat*, the Swiss government executive, was also part of the program. The transformational aspect of the event was captured when Vasco Pedrina, hitherto president of the Construction and Industry Union, and Renzo Ambrosetti, hitherto president of the Swiss Metalworkers and Watchmakers Association, both donned Unia-hats and addressed the crowd. Their respective organizations had joined together to become the multi-industry trade union Unia. As a result of this merger, Unia had overnight become the by far largest union in Switzerland with around 200'000 members in various branches of the private sector.

The actual roots of this merger go back to at least 1996, when both the construction union and the metalworkers union joined together to form the cooperative project *unia* (with a lowercase "u"). The goal of this first step together was to organize more workers in the service sector as this was considered a strategically important "union desert", where only a fraction of the many workers were organized. At the same time, it was precisely the service sector that was, in contrast to the union heartlands of construction and manufacturing, actually growing in the economy. Yet while the "greening" of the service sector was an important pillar of this cooperation, the alliance between the two unions was part of a far greater "strategic project" and pooling power resources in "traditional industries" was just as important (Rieger 2014: 17f.).

Intensifying their cooperative efforts throughout the years, a formal merger of the Swiss Metalworkers and Watchmakers Association with the Construction and Industry Union, which had by now overtaken the former to become the largest union in Switzerland, was principally decided upon as early as 2000 and 2002 in the respective delegates assemblies of the two organizations (ibid). At the end of 2004, however, the merger became official and the two organizations melted together, managing to additionally recruit the smaller Union for Retail, Trade, Transport and Groceries (*Gewerkschaft Verkauf, Handel, Transport und Lebensmittel, VHTL*) as well.

While this was generally speaking a merger of equals, and both the construction union and the metalworkers union were able to assert many of the organizational and political points that were important to their respective organizations, "[…] the construction groove remained dominant in the new organization", as one regional director of Unia told me (in Kelley 2017). In fact, the re-thinking process that had unfolded in the Construction and Industry Union about the future of the labor movement and industrial relations had not only become rather hegemonial in the newly founded Unia, but even more intense as well.

It was at least in this point that the dedication of the activists of the New Left, who had pursued a very concrete project of bringing organized labor back to its more movement-oriented roots, undoubtedly succeeded. Not only retrieving the instrument of the strike as a legitimate instrument of bargaining power, the very fundamental idea of a new "conflictual social partnership", where conflict was to represent a normal and inherent component of industrial relations between labor and capital, had developed as well (Kelley 2017). Besides touching the material reality of negotiations and workplace mobilizations, this rupture was also expressed on the discursive level. As one of the most important union leaders of the time, who played a central role in the 2002 construction strike, remarked to me: "The employers can call it "social partnership" if they want and refer to us and them as "social partners", but to me we are simply in a *Vertragspartnerschaft* [contract partnership] as *Vertragspartner* [contract partners] with very different interests – no more and no less." And in an article titled "conflictive partner", the center-right daily *Neue Zürcher Zeitung* concluded that "Since the nineties, SMUV [the Metalworkers and Watchmaking Association] and GBI [the Construction and Industry Union] respectively Unia has developed from a classic social partner to a combat organization." (Gemperli 2015: 13).

It goes without saying that this fundamental shift away from "legitimately expected behavior" (Parsons in Knight 1992: 15) has not been well received by most employers. Employers, especially in construction, regularly criticize the union for supposed breaches of the industrial peace. In the words of the current president of the construction employers association, this conflictive bargaining style of Unia is fundamentally "un-Swiss" (Lardi in Gemperli 2015: 13). As such, there has been a significant divergence in the respective understandings of what social partnership

actually means and especially what constraints it actually places on the union's contractual ability to organize protest actions – expressed on both a discursive level as well as one of concrete behavior and actions (Kelley 2017).

Yet while heavily and regularly criticized as ideologically-driven by both employers and some media commentators, from labor's perspective this conflictual social partnership has a certain rationality to it. On the one hand, if we adhere to Wright's (2000) conclusion that as long as capitalism exists, then it is in the best interest of organized labor to go into contractual relations with capital, i.e. a "class compromise". Thus, despite a clearer focus on mobilizations and a semantic shift in vocabulary and discourse, the system of social partnership in the sense of CLA-bargaining and bipartisan CLA enforcement was not fundamentally challenged from the side of labor. On the other hand, equally emphasized by Wright (ibid), if labor is to actually profit from such a "class compromise", it must be in a strong enough position of associational power to ensure that it is able to push through its demands within that compromise if not otherwise given. As such, a conflictual social partnership can represent a logical answer to this dilemma.

Today, Unia is made up of 200'000 members stretching across various industries of the economy, each organized in one of the four sectors of the organization: construction, crafts, manufacturing and services[10]. The heads of each sectors are voted in to their fulltime position by active union members and are then confirmed by the organization's congress, held every four years. These sector leaders are also part of the organizations seven-head national executive. While a national campaign such as that in construction is conceptualized, developed, coordinated and led by the respective national leaderships of the sectors, i.e. by the sector heads and their teams, the day to day organizing of workers, i.e. the operative realization of national campaigns such as the one in construction, is carried out by the organizing teams of Unia's 15 regional units.

Stretching across all of its four sectors and 15 regional units, Unia today employs around 300 political staff, including frontline organizers, researchers, political analysists and members of the national leadership. While in earlier days, union staff were almost exclusively recruited from the pools of activist workers, today's labor

[10] Unia website. https://www.unia.ch/de/ueber-uns/ (1.8.2017)

world has made that recruitment process more heterogeneous. On the one hand, the sharp left turn of the unions, one mirrored throughout a number of countries of the Western world, has attracted political activists who cut their political teeth in grassroots social movements such as the anti-globalization movement, the Young Socialists or anti-fascist groups, thus in a way representing a continuity of the New Left tradition of the 1990s. On the other hand, the changing profile of the job of a union organizer, evolving from a more stable and service-oriented one, to one with odd hours, high mental strain, daily conflict situations and one demanding high social skills mixed with complex conceptual abilities, is a rather unique one. In the case of the construction industry, with its blend of different languages, the necessity of mother-tongue Portuguese and Albanian speakers has further defined the pool of potential organizers.

While not all of the staff have an activist or political background, many do. In fact, as one union organizer even put it:

> In my eyes, I am basically a full time activist. I have the luck and privilege to serve the labor movement one hundred percent. To me it is not just a *Beruf* [job], but a *Berufung* [a calling]. That's why I personally do my eight hours a day as paid work, but I am proud to work much more in the sense of *Engagement* [activism] – just like thousands of our worker activists do after their long hours of often physically exhausting work. Yeah, of course I know it is not exactly the same and the daily realities and perspectives of staff organizers and volunteer activists are different in some regards, but that's the perspective I have on it and it's what drives me forward – together with our activists. I am a *Gewerkschafter* [union man].

Despite the important role of this rather large staff outfit, the main project of Unia is in fact, besides the quantitative growth of its membership base, to recruit and activate more workers themselves to take on active roles in the organization (Alleva 2014). While long an implicit vision of both the Construction and Industry Union as well as the newly founded Unia, a strategy of *Unia Forte* ("strong Unia") was formally launched in 2008 with the goal of building new and strengthening existing worker-activist-groups. This was particularly important as this volunteer worker activism had been strongly neglected during the corporatistic years of industrial peace and activist structures in many industries and companies had gradually petered out. This is an aspect which will be elaborated upon in chapter six.

Despite the fact that Unia has indeed managed to make headway in strategic areas of the service sector, in particular in hotels and catering, retail trade and newly health care, one of its more traditional sectors continues to take on an absolutely central role: the construction sector.

Continuing to fulfill the function of a union flagship within and outside of the labor movement, the construction industry has indeed remained one of Unia's most strongest sectors and also one of its most active ones. As one union organizer explained:

> Look, we founded this union because we wanted a labor movement that is strong, active and effective in all areas of the economy. From construction to manufacturing to health care. A fighting trade union that really deserves that name. But in today's reality, construction is the place where that is actually reality. Not that we aren't active or successful in other areas, but construction is the only industry where we are actually able to mobilize thousands of workers throughout the country and show everybody, both other workers as well as the public, that standing up together *works*. The union *works*. Fighting *works*. It's just an almost one to one example proving that we say can be reality. At the same time, it's just as much an inward goal and important to us as an organization. Because looking back at our predecessors, when you stop fighting, you get fat. You get lazy and weak. So waging broad, intensive and regular campaigns in construction also keeps us as a union active. It's the tugboat that keeps this whole movement going. Maybe that will change some day and that role will be taken up by some other group of workers. But for right now, it's construction.

In a similar tone, yet slightly more gleeful and personal, following a construction rally in one of the union's local regions that had had a surprisingly good turnout, union activist Emilio stated that: "You can tell the president [of Unia] that this is it! This is it! Construction is the motor of Unia that makes it drive like a Ferrari going 300 an hour! You can go tell that to the president!"

Yet despite this spirit of optimism, not all has been carefree in the union's historical stronghold. Looking back at the 2002 strike five years later, the former president of the construction union and first co-president of Unia, Vasco Pedrina, came to the ambiguous conclusion that while the union had indeed made significant steps in the years leading up to and after the strike, they still had a long way to go (Pedrina and

Hartmann 2007). For despite its success in 2002, construction's "Blitzstreik" for early retirement was just as much the product of an emotional topic, tireless agitation and good planning as it was the intuitive seizing of a very unique and rare opportunity (Pedrina and Hartmann 2007: 95). For by having exploited the fact that at the time the construction employers association was weak and divided and also having managed to take the employers by surprise with the union's spectacular highway-blockade, the union managed to compensate for the fact that it had not truly regained the level of mobilizational ability it had lost during the decades of industrial peace. Thus, emphasizing that the 2002 strike could not simply be replicated at will, Pedrina and Hartmann state that "The unions will have to develop new paths if they do not want to be pushed back into the defensive." (Pedrina and Hartmann 2007: 95).

This was, however, no simple task. Generally speaking, employers throughout the industry had continued to drift far to the political right and had consolidated the mainstreaming of neoliberal principles both on a political level as well as on an economic one. Furthermore, they had begun to react more systematically and professionally when unions attempted to organize industrial action (Pedrina and Hartmann 2007: 90). After their embarrassing defeat in 2002, the construction employers association went through a profound process of change. Looking back, a former Unia construction leader (who was otherwise proud of his militant reputation) even privately admitted that "Maybe it would have been smarter of us not to have so publicly ridiculed the employers after winning in 2002."

Besides replacing its leadership with a more hardliner president, one who had run on a slate of never again giving in to the unions, the construction employers association had also professionalized its workings as an organization. Starting by encouraging its member companies to take a harder stance against union organizers when the latter visited their construction sites, the association also built up a skilled political communications department. Together with its legal department, the association began to provide companies with step by step tactical instructions on how to prevent even the most timid union mobilizations from unfolding.

This anti-union posturing was particularly expressed in 2007 when the construction employers unilaterally terminated the collective labor agreement. This unprecedented step came when the union refused to consent to a "light version" of the CLA ("*LMV-*

light"), which would have made the industry's CLA immensely more flexible in questions of minimum wages, working times, etc. While Unia was ultimately able to turn the overly aggressive stance of the employers into a dynamic of "defending our rights" and responded by organizing strikes and ultimately renegotiating the CLA, it was a clear manifestation of the course employers were steering in their attempts to discipline the union. While employers were wise enough not to actually terminate the agreement in the next round of negotiations in 2011, both parties nonetheless took such a bullish stance that the running contract expired before an agreement could be found and there was a short period of *Vertragslosigkeit* (a time where the industry is "contractless", without a contract). It also saw the employers toy with the idea of having a CLA, but not with Unia, the largest union in the industry.

When 2015 arrived and the CLA was once again to be renegotiated by the end of the year, both the employers and the unions were aware of what was at stake. This concerned not only the latest demands of the union, but touched upon a far deeper level of who was able to assert themselves. The situation was particularly sensitive as both the construction employers association and Unia's construction department had new leaders as the previous ones had retired. As such, neither side was particularly keen on the idea of giving in and losing face.

While the union as usual had a long catalogue of demands, three issues were particularly important from its perspective. First of all, it wanted to introduce a more worker-friendly CLA-article concerning criteria for shutting down construction sites during bad weather as well as for guaranteeing that workers did not lose hours or wages when work is put on hold in such situations. Today, despite a minimum amount of protective measures, the industry's CLA is rather vague as to what actually constitutes for bad weather. And when workers actually do stay at home, they often pay for it with wage- and/or hour-deductions. Second of all, the union has long pushed for more effective provisions against CLA-violations by employers, i.e. measures against so-called wage- and social-dumping. As will become clear in the next chapter, the Swiss construction industry has become increasingly plagued by intense competition between companies, often ending with some employers either illegally depriving workers of their minimum wages and benefits or otherwise keeping personnel-costs systematically low.

The union's third demand, however, was by far the most decisive one. As noted above, the construction industry's early retirement scheme gives workers the chance to retire at 60 instead of the regular age of 65. It was and is not only a highly popular, but also deeply emotionalized institution. For construction workers, the *Flexibler Altersrückritt FAR* (*flexible retirement*), as it is called, is both a source of hope in the sense of knowing they will not have to "work and die as a cripple", as one worker phrased it, as well as a source of pride by feeling that their hard manual labor is not only given meaningful and material recognition, but that they had successfully fought for it.

However, as described in the introduction, due to demographic changes seeing a particularly large number of workers reaching retirement age in the next ten years, *FAR* needed additional funding. While Unia together with the smaller union Syna demanded that the problem be resolved through raising employer and employee dues, the employers had a different solution in mind. Referring to wider societal debates on retirement and the growingly dominant idea that employees everywhere will have to work longer in the future, the employers demanded that the construction workers' early-retirement-age should either be raised from 60 to 61 or even 62 or that the workers' monthly pensions be reduced.

Aware that Unia would attempt to wage a campaign along the issue, the employers decided to wait it out. Starting at the end of 2014, they refused to negotiate with the union on anything at all. The reason the employers gave for their refusal was neither the explicit issue of retirement nor even Unia's generally combatant approach. It was in fact a new department in one of Unia's local regions (Kelley 2017). Sporting the name *Department for Risk Analysis* (*Fachstelle Risikoanalyse*), the goal of this new unit is to provide prime contractors with systematic assessments on whether or not their subcontractors abide by labor laws and CLA regulations.

The background of this new department is complex. In 2013, after a public pressure campaign by Unia and its allies in parliament, a new law of *Solidarhaftung* (solidary liability) was passed making prime contractors in construction partially liable for the labor-violations committed by their subcontractors. In fact, this step alone had already upset the construction employers. For in their eyes, such a rule could and should not to be determined by the third-party state, but by the social partners alone.

Thus, by (successfully) campaigning and calling on the state to introduce such a law after having failed to win it as a CLA-concession in the 2011/2012 negotiations, Unia had in the view of the employers already clearly overstepped a red line.

When one of the union's local regions then introduced its *Department for Risk Analysis*, unilaterally offering prime contractors assessments as to whether or not their subcontractors (including renowned construction companies) abided by CLA-regulations and labor laws, the construction employers association was livid (Kelley 2017). In their eyes, this latest move by Unia represented a clearly unilateral version of *contract enforcement*, thus breaching the very essence of bipartisan social partnership. In the eyes of Unia, however, not only had they previously offered to launch this new unit together with the employers, which the latter had explicitly declined, but in any case the new department did not actually enforce the contract. It did not carry out inspections nor did it sanction violations, but simply provided analysis based on already existing information after obtaining the written permission of the potential subcontractor (who were asked to give this by the prime contractor). As such, this was, in the eyes of the union, not contract enforcement, but a severely necessary *preventive measure* in the fight against the growing menace of wage-dumping.

Besides undoubtedly authentic opposition to the union's new department described above, in the eyes of Unia the employers' rationale behind their refusal to negotiate also had a strategic logic. By Swiss law, if a social insurance, such as construction's early retirement, finds itself unable to pay out its pensions, then a governmental board is compelled to intervene. However, as the government cannot force the institution in question to raise its funding, but only intervene in the preexisting financial framework, then the only possible measure at hand is the forced reduction of pensions and/or raising workers' retirement age. Thus, in other words, if the employers could continue to refuse to negotiate, then their demands would be automatically fulfilled after a certain point in time. According to Unia's calculations, that time would arrive rather quickly, namely at the beginning of 2016.

This was the situation in which the union found itself at the beginning of the 2015 campaign: a setting demanding that the union either give in to the partial dismantling of early retirement or amass enough bargaining power to force the employers to first

of all start negotiating and second of all actually concede to raising their financial contributions towards the early retirement scheme. Besides the already tense situation in the industrial relations of construction, the political environment concerning the question of retirement age in general did not make the union's position any more easy.

When looking back at our journey through the chequered development of industrial relations in Switzerland, going from conflict to cooperation and to a certain extent back to conflict again, it becomes clear that the subject is neither one of some unilineal evolution nor a simple case of history repeating itself. While a historically speaking relatively short phase of corporatist social partnership has now been succeeded by a return to more openly waged conflicts of interest, today's case is neither one of exclusive conflict nor one of exclusive cooperation. As pointed out above and will be seen in greater detail in the coming chapter, todays growing industrial strife is, in marked contrast to industrial relations of the pre-war years, nonetheless embedded in the deep institutional framework held together in the collective labor agreement. We are thus dealing with an entirely new form of social partnership, one that is spread out on a multilayered continuum of cooperation and conflict, including collective bargaining, bipartisan CLA-enforcement and occasional cooperative projects such as that during the industry's crisis of the 1990s.

Yet besides more aggressive construction employer stances in a more neoliberally influenced political economy and the union still not having completely recovered from decades of mobilizational passivity during the era of industrial peace, the union was simultaneously facing additional barriers of a more structural nature. While the roots of these barriers can also be contextualized in the neoliberal changes of the time, they were less a conscious or direct product of union-busting, but more an unintended consequence of the increased use of precarious forms of labor. Nonetheless, they undoubtedly represented and continue to represent yet further obstacles to collective action. In order to not only shed light on those structural upheavals, but also on the changing functioning of the industry in general, we will now explore the world of the Swiss construction industry.

4. Unstable Foundations: Changing Swiss Construction

The team of union organizers stood in front of the construction site in preparation for one of their routine visits. It was the construction site of a tall building, located just along the train tracks leading into the capital city of Unia's Mittelland region. The site was located in a dense urban area, hugged by railroad tracks on the one side and a busy main street on the other. Despite this lack of space, the gradually arising office-building-to-be was nonetheless a rather grand undertaking. Because of this density everything on the site was rather compact. Unlike many other sites, there was little space leading up to and around the new building itself. The green and white containers of the workers, the "barracks" in which they had their coffee and lunch breaks, were wedged together as well as stacked upon each other to save space, with wooden stairs ascending to the upper ones. The building material and surplus scaffolding was closely bunched together in a remarkably neat manner. Only the tall crane towering above was given its due space, although even it sacrificed no unnecessary room.

In contrast to smaller sites visited throughout the day, the local region's union organizers would often visit such large ones during the workers' lunch breaks. It was far from the first time they had been on this particular site, nor were its workers unknown to them. In fact, a lot of the workers on the site seemed to be well acquainted with the union organizers.

"Back again? You must really miss us if you have nothing better to do!", laughed one of the workers in a teasingly provocative, but friendly manner. "Yeah, I really can't live without you Paulo, as you can imagine.", one of the female organizers of the team hurled back at the longtime union member, jestingly rolling her eyes. "Want a coffee?", he then said, evidently satisfied that he had fulfilled the obligatory ritual of challenging the organizers – letting them know that they were welcome, but not without a jab.

"Can we assemble everybody together? We have some news we want to share with you. It's important." As noted above, the workers were far from strangers to the structured routines of the union's organizing team and quickly gathered in the little space there was in front of the castle of containers. Forming a half circle, some were sitting, some were standing. It was the second half of the lunch break and a number

of workers were by now sipping espresso from disposable plastic cups. In total, there were about forty workers present and this time, even the foreman joined the group. He was not without his own testing digs, but was generally sympathetic to the union.

The union organizers, alternating between one organizer speaking German and the other Portuguese, then proceeded to inform the workers about the latest move by the construction employers and about how the latter still refused to negotiate based on supposedly shady reasons. Towards the end of this "presentation", as the organizers termed it, a rather lively discussion broke out and a lot of the workers had a number of questions, something that was not necessarily always the case. What happens if the employers continue to refuse to negotiate? What will the union do about it? What did the union want the workers to do about it? Can the state do anything?

To anybody unfamiliar with construction, the half circle formed was a rather homogeneous pack. All were wearing work clothes and each had heavy, steel-toed safety boots. Of course, some were more tanned than others, some sported tattoos while others did not, and the fact that the organizers were switching languages revealed the obvious fact that this was a group made up of different nationalities.

Looking closer, however, while all were wearing some kind of work clothes and had a hardhat and tool-belt lurking somewhere nearby, at second glance a surprisingly large variety of company logos adorned the sweatshirts, pants and hardhats of the seemingly unified crowd. Furthermore, also far from clear at first glance, some of the workers wore the gear of companies that were actually not even involved in the project at hand. The fact that their logos were present was a remnant of some of the workers' past employments, equally serving as a subtle sign that their current employer had not equipped them with new clothes. A scant majority, however, wore green and orange pants and jackets displaying a large "A" standing for the company "Anker" [company pseudonym], the main construction firm involved.

Having previously briefed each other on the drive to the construction site, one of the organizers had remarked upon the heterogeneity of the group: "[…] Anyway, this is an Anker site and the majority are Anker guys, but right now there are a number of subs [subcontractors] on the site as well. Iron-layers, shuttering workers, even some bricklayers that are subs. Besides that, as you all know, a lot of the Anker workers are temporary workers. It's not so clear how long they will stay on this site."

Once the union organizers had concluded their presentation and the lively discussions had died out, the workers slowly dispersed back to their containers, either to get another coffee or to lay down for five minutes before the second half of the day began.

Themselves walking back to the car, the lead organizer of the union team was beginning to assess their visit: How many people were there? What was the mood like? Which "groups" had come to the presentation? The permanently employed Anker workers? The temporary workers? The subcontractors?

"Wait – what about the temporary workers from the container back left. The Spanish ones? Were they there?" "No, I don't think so", the other organizer replied.

"Why didn't somebody talk to that group?! Why?!"

What towards the end of this episode may come across as comical confusion to an uninvolved onlooker was by now a rather common phenomenon on the construction sites of Switzerland: a growingly fragmented workforce. In fact, in the larger metropolitan centers such as region Mittelland, such diverse and heterogeneous workforces were the rule, not the exception. In place of solid crews employed by one company, today's workforces tend to be composed of one main company, in the above case Anker, a substantial number of temporary workers momentarily embedded in the main company's team (yet employed through personnel agencies), and finally a number of groups employed by smaller subcontractor companies sent to do specific, often repetitive tasks and then being deployed to other sites after the task is completed. And this was, of course, only the main construction trades, i.e. the building of the main, outer skeleton. As can be imagined, the effects of this process, both on the workers as well as on the union organizing them, are dramatic.

After our historical journey through the development of organized labor in the last chapter, this one will take a closer look at the currently changing world of construction labor itself. After first introducing the reader to the structures and particularities of the industry, we will then examine the wider political economic parameters thereof. This in particular concerns the industry's collective labor agreement and the various and sometimes contradicting ways it shapes the economic workings of construction. What will become clear is that the CLA not only

protects workers' wages and working conditions, but that it may simultaneously be saving the employers from their own collective action problems (Wright 2000) and general "shortsightedness" (Marx paraphrased in Harvey 2010: 157) by serving to stabilize otherwise "wild" and "unfair" competition. Furthermore, the flow of much needed migrant labor onto Switzerland's construction sites, guaranteed to a large part by the bilateral agreements with the European Union, and the interdependencies between this and the industry's CLA, will also be examined.

The second half of the chapter will then examine in depth the transformational changes unfolding in construction, ones leading directly to the realities noted in the introductory paragraphs above. It will show how a vicious cycle of price and time competition, articulated along the wider neoliberal turn elaborated on in the last chapter, has led to the introduction of new and more precarious forms of employment. Besides calling the wages, working conditions and job security of individual construction workers into question, on an even deeper level it has altered the composition of the labor force as a whole. By focusing on the effects of this precarization on the social structure of the workforce, our analysis will reveal the serious challenges arising for a union attempting to organize these workers into a collective force.

The Industry: Hard-Hats, Containers and Interest-Rates

Whether in Switzerland or in the United States, the construction industry often plays a vital role in the greater economy of industrialized nations. While the industry exercised even greater weight in the immediate post-war years and into the 1970s, construction continues to be an essential motor of economic growth in modern-day capitalism. Making up roughly around one tenth of the entire gross domestic product (Schweizerischer Baumeisterverband 2016: 8), the construction industry in Switzerland is a major player in the greater economy and, due to this economic importance, the significance as well as influence of the industry stretches far into the political sphere. As can be imagined, the great bulk of construction activity is carried out in metropolitan areas such as region Mittelland, where everything from the building of massive apartment buildings to gigantic industrial construction is conducted.

The main construction industry, which represents the heart of the greater building sector as well as the subject of this thesis, is responsible for producing the main framework and outer shell of buildings, roads, canals, tunnels, etc.[11] In Switzerland, this is generally divided into *Hochbau* (construction above ground such as houses and buildings) and *Tiefbau* (infrastructure construction on or underground, such as roads and tunnels). While infrastructure construction is an important part of the industry and can also be very profitable for the companies involved, the majority of employees work in *Hochbau*, i.e. in the construction of above-ground buildings.

Once the excavation of a building site is completed, a task often conducted by *Tiefbau*-companies, the main construction process is made up of a wide number of tasks and jobs. Leading the actual construction operation is one or on larger sites several *Poliere* or foremen. They are the highest-ranking construction workers still involved in the operative part of the production process. To quote one such informant of mine: "We run the show, but we still get our hands dirty." These foremen are in turn assisted by one or more *Vorarbeiter*, squad leaders in charge of smaller sections of the site. The crew itself is then made up of *Maurer*, bricklayers with the widest diversity and skills, as well as *Eisenleger*, who install the iron-reinforcements upon which concrete is later poured, and *Schaler*, who assemble the temporary wooden-boarding along the iron-reinforcements. The *Maurer*, however, are the main group that not only tend to be employed by the main construction company leading the site, but also the ones that are on the site for the longest period of time due to their wide range of tasks. Furthermore, each site will also have one or more *Kranführer* or crane operators, depending on the number of cranes, and one or more *Maschinisten*, heavy-machine operators.

Despite technological progress, construction remains a labor-intensive industry. As a result, the main construction industry alone employs between 80'000 and 100'000 (almost exclusively male) workers. This number varies depending on the statistical source as well as on the season of the year. Thus, the main construction industry represents an important player in the wider labor market. Especially when the

[11] Following the main construction phase on building sites, there is of course an equally complex phase of interior construction, involving plasterers, painters, electricians, etc. The thesis at hand focuses its perspective on the main construction trades due to the latter's central economic importance as well as its strategic meaning for the union and because interior construction is embedded in different CLAs and displays different social phenomena.

industry finds itself in an economic upswing such as that of today, it is desperately reliant on a steady flow of labor power, which is not always so easy to find. In fact, at least every third worker has no formal training, but is recruited to learn “on the job” (Schweizerischer Baumeisterverband 2016: 41). The other two thirds are made up of previously unskilled workers who have meanwhile completed a machinists or crane-operator course and a minority of workers who completed a three-year-apprenticeship to become a qualified *Maurer* or in the realm of *Tiefbau*, a qualified *Strassenbauer* (street builder).

Such three-year apprenticeships generally begin after one has completed obligatory schooling, when the candidates are around sixteen years of age. The Swiss apprenticeship system is built as a dual-education system, meaning that apprentices generally work three days a week and go to vocational school on the other two. Due to their later much needed skills and thus strong individual position in the construction labor market, many of these qualified *Maurer* go on to become *Vorarbeiter* (squad leaders) and then *Poliere* (foremen). That being said, the industry finds it notoriously difficult to recruit young people for an apprenticeship. While perhaps phrased in somewhat different words, many employers in the industry attribute this to construction’s universal reputation as a “dirty job“ (Piore 1979) as well as “society’s lack of respect for manual trades”, as a number of informants, both employers and employees, have phrased it. Each year, a little more than one thousand apprentices complete their training (Schweizerischer Baumeisterverband 2016: 5) – a comparatively low rate given the size of the industry.

Not least as a result of the difficulties construction employers have in securing labor power in Switzerland and in keeping with what seems to be a strikingly common aspect of construction throughout the industrialized world, the Swiss construction industry has long been reliant on migrant labor. In fact, the great majority of construction workers in Switzerland are not Swiss citizens. At least 63% of employees in the main construction industry are non-Swiss-citizens (Schweizerischer Baumeisterverband 2016: 43). This number does not include workers with an immigrant background who are meanwhile naturalized citizens. Every year, between 8’000 and 10’000 new workers need to be recruited from outside of Switzerland just in order to compensate the industry’s fluctuation of labor (Gygi 2014). That being said, the great majority of formally qualified bricklayers, squad leaders and foremen

are Swiss citizens, while migrant workers tend to fall into the categories of “unskilled” or semi-skilled laborers.

While some of these migrant workers were already living in Switzerland at the time they entered the construction industry, a great number thereof are systematically recruited in their countries of origin. This recruitment process can take on a more formal style, such as through personnel agencies publicly advertising in Portugal or Italy, yet it can also fall back on more informal networks, when for example an employer will directly ask one or more of his employees if they “have a brother or cousin that would be interested in a job”, as a number of informants pointed out.

While yesterday’s construction workforces were, besides Swiss workers, primarily made up of Italian and to a certain extent Spanish workers, the quantitative significance of both of the latter groups has drastically declined in the past decades. The construction sites of today are in fact manned by far more ethnically heterogeneous crews. Next to the Swiss workers, the by far largest group today are Portuguese, constituting almost a third of the entire workforce. While representing a significantly smaller portion of the entire personnel, Italians workers and workers coming from ex-Yugoslavia follow behind the Portuguese with 11, respectively 9 percent.

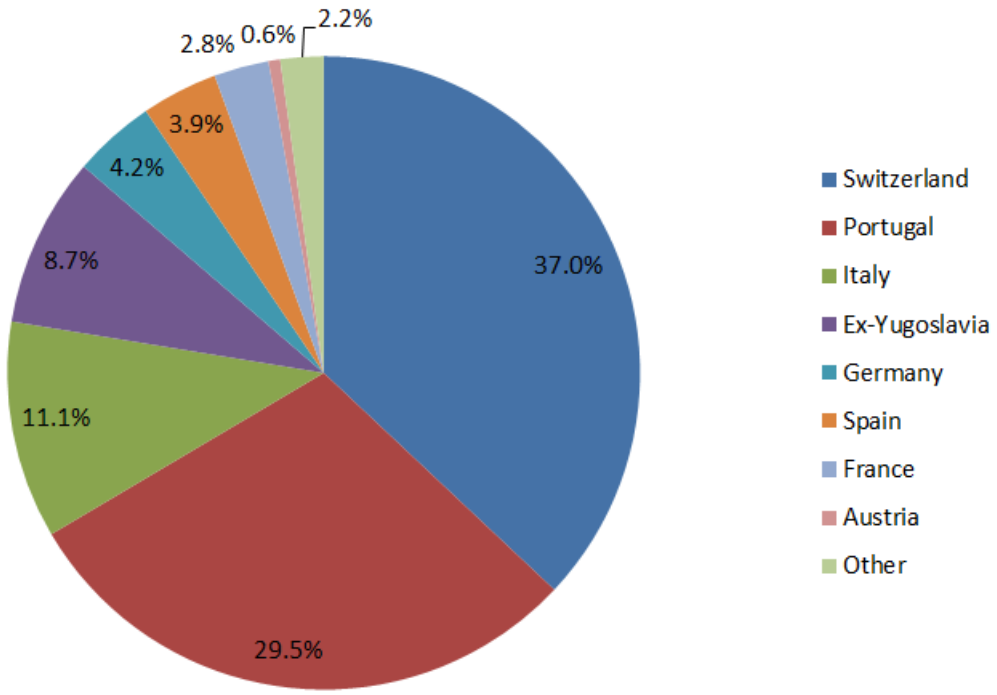


Figure 1: Nationality structure of Swiss building site personnel
Source: Schweizerischer Baumeisterverband (2016: 43), own illustration

Besides the mobility of the labor power flowing into the production process from nearby and not-so-nearby countries, construction is simultaneously characterized by both a structural *mobility* as well as at the same time, on a different level, a strong geographical *immobility*. Understanding this dialectic puzzle is in fact vital in order to not only understand the workings of the industry, but also the associational as well as structural power of a union organizing and bargaining within it.

On the one hand, the construction industry is a fundamentally mobile industry in the sense that in contrast to a factory producing transportable commodities, the production process in construction, with the exception of construction materials, must largely take place at the location of future "consumption" itself, i.e. where the envisioned building is to be constructed. The labor process thus occurs in "travelling factories" (Bosch and Zühlke-Robinet 2000: 14) and the individual workplace of each construction crew is one that shifts every few years, months and sometimes, depending on their function within that process, even weeks or days. Everything from labor power, heavy-machinery, building materials and the workers' resting containers are brought to and later taken away from these "travelling factories".

Due to this local boundedness and a simultaneously low entry barrier for new companies (as some of the tasks are not necessarily capital-intensive), there is a rather strong regionalization of the construction industry. In other words, while a trans-regionalization is indeed unfolding today, local companies continue to play an important role in the industry. From an organizing perspective and thus one of associational power, what this mobility also means, is that it is easier for the union to establish contact with workers as their workplaces are generally "open" in contrast to the closed gates of a stationary factory. That being said, it is also easier for violations of the CLA and labor laws to occur (Bosch and Zühlke-Robinet 2000: 23), as the industry is far less surveyable due to the fact that some of the smaller companies, usually ones either installing iron-reinforcements or boarding, will only stay on a site for a number of weeks or even days. We will return to this later on.

On the other hand, representing the dialectic flip side of this mobility, the construction industry is also inherently immobile in a greater sense, due to the very same reasons. Given that the place of production, i.e. that of construction, is bound to the place of future consumption, the labor process itself cannot be exported or outsourced to other countries. It is, in this sense, bound to its future locality. While in some countries ready-installable houses are produced in factories and then transported to their future residencies, this is far from common, let alone prevalent. Besides technical aspects and transportation difficulties, this is also because buildings generally represent architecturally unique specimens and not mass staple articles.

The vital importance of this second feature for a union's structural power cannot be overemphasized. Given organized labor's traditional strongholds in the manufacturing industry, unions in many countries have in the past decades been paralyzed by the outsourcing of their members' jobs to far off countries with lower wages, taxes and general production costs. Even when not (yet) the case, the threat thereof has served to discipline labor from calling for "too high" demands. In the Swiss construction industry, however, this outsourcing-threat is, given the structures of the industry, simply not a factor. In the globalized and neoliberal realities of today's economy, the removal of this sword of Damocles hanging over the head of labor represents a significant relief to labor's structural power.

Also adding to organized labor's structural power is the fact that, currently speaking, the Swiss construction industry has been going through an intensive economic upswing for more than a decade. The industry has in fact reached the highest record of growth Swiss construction has ever witnessed. While a number of massive infrastructure projects in the last decade have contributed to this growth, the most important motor thereof has been the building of new housing. This is in turn is traceable to currently low interest rates which have made investing in real estate a lucrative project.

That being said, the long-term stability of this growth is, as is any in the capitalist economy (Harvey 2011), certainly questionable. Indeed, it would not be the first time a bubble popped in the industry, leading among other things to absolutely massive lay-offs. During construction's last severe crisis, in the mid-1990s, this led to a reduction of the entire workforce to around half of its previous size.

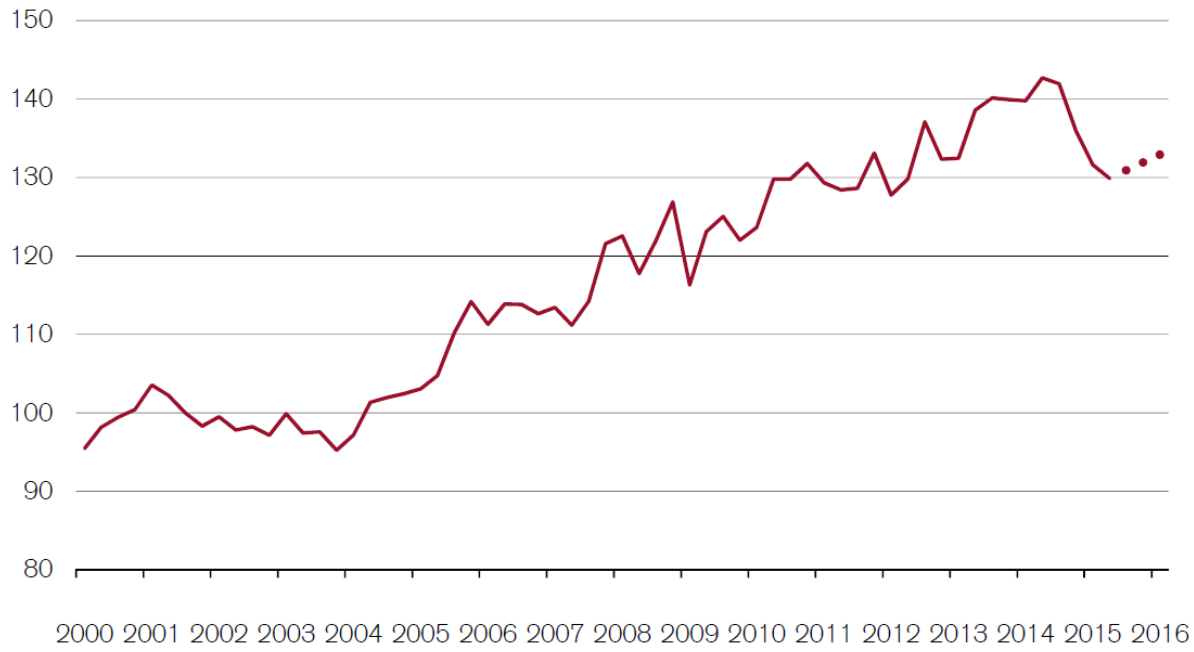


Figure 2: *Construction Index* of expected turnovers in construction as of mid-May 2015, 100% = 1st quarter of 1996
Source: *Bauindex Schweiz*, Credit Suisse and Schweizerischer Baumeisterverband.
http://www.baumeister.ch/de/politik-wirtschaft/wirtschaftsdaten/bauindex (24.5.2017)

Construction's "Bible": the Collective Labor Agreement

Considering that the economy is, like any other social phenomenon, embedded in a vast array of social institutions (Bugra and Agartan (eds.) 2007), we must continue our exploration of the changing Swiss construction industry and what that means for

organized labor by looking at the collective labor agreement, which as a social institution plays an absolutely vital role in shaping and structuring how the industry works.

As noted in the previous chapter, the construction industry in Switzerland has been institutionally framed by a nationally valid collective labor agreement since 1938. This institution was, in a classic Knight-ian sense, originally born out of fierce industrial conflict between workers and employers. And while it continues to represent the main battlefield for both the unions as well as the construction employers association when it comes to diverging interests, especially during phases of contract renewal every three years, its main effect during contract periods is in fact a stabilizing one that is to a certain extent in the interest of both parties.

Negotiated for a set amount of time, usually three years, by the Swiss Construction Employers Association on the one hand and Unia and the smaller Christian union Syna on the other, the CLA "pretty much has something to say about everything you could possibly imagine", as one leading union official put it. While this does not mean that each side is necessarily content with every aspect of the agreement, as the CLA in effect represents a collection of bygone concessions between both labor and capital, the CLA has a remarkable depth. Furthermore, as it is declared generally binding by the state, it represents the rules of the game for all players involved, irrelevant if they belong to one of the signing parties or not and also making no exceptions for dispatched workers, firms temporarily working in Switzerland and personnel agencies temporarily "renting out" workers. As Leonardo, a long-time worker activist put it: "For all we are concerned, the CLA is our bible."

When compared with the roughly six hundred other CLAs in Switzerland[12], the construction industry's so-called *Landesmantelvertrag* (national framework agreement) indeed stands out as one guaranteeing particularly high standards. This characteristic is something both the construction employers as well as the union often point out, although also here the interpretations of what that means diverge greatly. While the employers suggest that because the CLA is so progressive, any and all talk of enhancing it is unrealistic, the unions recruit and keep members by

[12] Bundesamt für Statistik. Gesamtarbeitsverträge und Sozialpartnerschaft. https://www.bfs.admin.ch/bfs/de/home/statistiken/arbeit-erwerb/gesamtarbeitsvertraege-sozialpartnerschaft.html (5.6.2017)

pointing out their achievements, yet simultaneously emphasizing that “not all issues have been resolved yet, such as the question of wage-dumping and bad weather”, as one union recruiter phrased it.

The CLA indeed covers a vast array of issues: minimum wages, working hours, overtime supplements, five weeks of paid holiday respectively six for those over 50, sick leave regulations and dismissal conditions to name only a few. Considering the seasonality of the industry, which involves most companies doing more work in the spring, summer and fall and far less in the cold and icy winter, in which it can be both irrationally difficult as well as dangerous, complex rules regulate how a yearly total of 2’112 hours can be spread throughout the year. There is a separate CLA for the industry’s foremen, yet it is largely based on the industry’s main CLA. And while the industry’s early retirement scheme, covering both construction workers and foremen, is also an institution of social partnership between the same players involved in the CLA, it is technically a separate CLA for actuarial reasons.

Minimum-wage category (per month)	**"C"** *employees without professional skills*	**"B"** *employees with professional skills, but no formal training (usually after three years job-experience)*	**"A"** *employees without an apprentice-ship, but with a crane operators or machinists certificate*	**"Q"** *employees who completed a three year apprentice-ship*	**"V"** *Squad leaders*
Red zone (cities and higher-cost regions)	CHF 4'548	CHF 5'112	CHF 5'424	CHF 5'633	CHF 6'337
Blue zone (middle-cost regions)	CHF 4'477	CHF 4'978	CHF 5'348	CHF 5'553	CHF 6'080
Green zone (rural areas and lower-cost regions)	CHF 4'413	CHF 4'843	CHF 5'273	CHF 5'478	CHF 5'822

Figure 3: Minimum wages in the Swiss construction industry since 2014
Source: www.gav-service.ch (1.4.2017)

While the unions and employers generally clash when it comes to enhancing or dismantling certain articles during renewal negotiations every three years, as soon as the new CLA is negotiated and signed, it is, generally speaking, in the interest of both organized labor as well as organized employers to ensure that the rules they have now agreed upon are actually enforced. Discussed in the previous chapter, as soon as employers A and B concede to a minimum level of wages and working conditions, they have a very clear and material interest to ensure that their competition adheres

to the rules of the game as well. Only this can prevent competitors from being able to offer lower prices due to a more modest level of wages and working conditions. It is within this convergence of material interests that the "*paritätischer Vertragsvollzug*" or paritarian (i.e. bipartisan) contract enforcement is embedded. Let us take a closer look.

According to Swiss law, the normative regulations of a CLA declared legally binding by the state have a clear legal status. As such, they are, for the employers of the industry in question, just as legally binding as any other law. That being said, and indeed fitting well with the liberal discourse propagated by employers, the state systematically withdraws itself from the field of contract enforcement (Kelley 2017). Instead, it transfers its powers of enforcement, that in the case of any other law would clearly lay in the hands of the state, onto the social partners of the relevant industry's CLA. In other words, the actual task of inspecting and sanctioning violations of the agreement are carried out by the employers and the unions together.

This task is, however, neither executed by the employers nor by the unions alone, but by so-called *paritätische Kommissionen* (paritarian commissions). Their decision-making bodies (*Vorstand*/executive board, *Vereinsversammlung*/general assembly) are made up of a small but equal number of employer and union representatives delegated by their respective associations and these bipartisan commissions are responsible for ensuring that the rules of the game are upheld. Their activities consist of checking company pay-rolls and working hours, carrying out visits to construction sites and interviewing the workers present. Then, if a violation is detected, the commissions will inform the company in question of its violation and duty to reimburse the workers effected. The commission will also decide upon whether or not as well as how much to fine the offending company depending on the severity of the offense.

In contrast to contract enforcement in other, smaller industries, in construction this is organized on a local, regional basis. This is on the one hand due to the size of the industry as well as due to historical reasons, but also fits well within the generally strong position of federalist institutions in Switzerland. As such, there are twenty-five regional paritarian commissions for the main construction industry in Switzerland. While these commissions are paritarian or bipartisan, they are free to delegate

certain tasks or activities to the contract partners themselves. In this sense, there are a number of commissions in which the local branch of the construction employers association is financially compensated for conducting the secretarial aspects of the work and Unia is in turn charged with carrying out actual inspections on the construction sites themselves. The latter does so, however, not as Unia, but as a representative of the paritarian commission. There is furthermore a national commission that deals with complex and unclear cases and supports the local commissions in the interpretation of certain articles, yet does not carry out operative inspection work itself.

Besides the enforcement of the normative regulations put forth by the industry's CLA, a further institutional column of social partnership in construction is the so-called *Parifonds*. Representing a particularly strong case of entangled interests (Kelley 2017), this paritarian fund is, in the words of one union officer, "the glue holding everything together". As its name suggests, the *Parifonds* is a fund both jointly financed as well as jointly administered by capital and labor. Paid for by employee and company/employer dues, in 2015 0,55% of each employee's monthly wage and an employer contribution of 0,4% of the total wage sum were paid into this fund. The institution itself was established following CLA negotiations in the 1970s. The Parifonds' stated goal is to provide the finances necessary for the enforcement of the CLA on the one hand, yet also to pay for workers' professional training as well.

Considering the high amount of unskilled labor in the industry and the difficulty of recruiting young apprentices, the financing of professional training is often just as much in the interest of the employers as it is in that of the workers. So, while the Parifonds pays for labor inspections and the wider activities of contract enforcement, companies can also sign their workers up for professional courses and pass on the costs thereof to the Parifonds. In both aspects, it is particularly the larger and/or more professional companies that profit from the Parifonds' services. This is due to the fact that it is these companies which tend to more strictly adhere to CLA regulations on the one hand and also send more employees to training courses, in contrast for example to a smaller company focused on the repetitive task of installing iron-reinforcements.

Besides the tasks of supporting contract enforcement and workers' professional training, the Parifonds also fulfills a third, less formal function (Kelley 2017). It is this function that is particularly interesting from an institutional perspective on collective organization. As described in the theoretical chapter of this thesis, institutionalist theoreticians, as well as many other scholars focusing on the subject, have long emphasized the vital importance of specific institutions when it comes to supporting collective action. From an Olson-ian worker's perspective, if the CLA counts for me anyway, whether I belong to the union or not, then why should I pay to be a union member (Kelly 1998)? It is here that social institutions can come into play. Aimed at either rewarding individual actors for their participation or sanctioning them for not participating, institutions can serve to reduce this much-discussed free-rider problem.

In Swiss construction, at least when it comes to formal union membership, such a role is assumed by the Parifonds. As noted above, all workers in construction, as do their employers, pay Parifonds dues. Considering that a union member pays both these dues as well as monthly membership-dues to the union, he or she, so the argument goes, makes a double contribution to the industry's system of social partnership. In order to reduce this double financial burden, a union member is, according to the rules of the Parifonds, entitled to a reimbursement of up to 80% of his union membership fees. What this means in a practical sense, is that a union member will pay around fifty francs per month to the union, depending on his exact income, yet at the end of the year is reimbursed for twelve times forty francs, i.e. 80% of his total dues. What this in effect does, is to substantially reduce the financial costs of union membership. In the words of one union recruiter, "Because of that, I can basically tell potential members that it will cost them a Kebab-sandwich a month, but that through that they are guaranteed better wages and working conditions and they also have individual legal insurance – something that only union members have."

That being said, while this mechanism of the Parifonds-institution does to a large extent reduce the costs of an individual's *membership* in the union, it of course does not solve the question of active *participation* in the union's structures and activities, something that will be revisited in the following chapter. In fact, expressing Knight's warning that institutions can simultaneously empower as well as constrain all actors involved, while the Parifonds may aid individual recruitment, it also has a more constraining effect on a union's conflict and campaigning ability. For given that the

Parifonds is tied to the collective labor agreement, this makes both the unions as well as the employers, assuming they want the Parifonds and financial benefits thereof to continue, dependent on the existence of a CLA. This becomes especially clear when the fund's existence is called into question during periods of *Vertragslosigkeit* ("contractless" periods), i.e. when the old CLA has expired and the unions and employers have not (yet) reached an agreement on renewing it.

For the employers, a potential loss of the Parifonds during such a period would mean not only losing inspections that help to curb overly cheap and "unfair competition" (and there would be no more legal base to conduct inspections anyway), thus again unleashing their own collective action problems, but also losing millions of francs for professional training. For the unions, besides losing all regulations ranging from working time to minimum wages during a contractless period, a potential loss of the Parifonds would also raise the individual cost of union membership to five times what it effectively is today (through the loss of reimbursement). This would in turn likely lead to a visible reduction of its membership. It is precisely because of this that following the contractless period of 2007/2008, the social partners changed the Parifonds' rules so as to ensure that it continues to run for a certain period even in such times. That being said, in such a period, the Parifonds is then no longer generally binding nor is its long-term existence secure. It is in this sense that longer periods of conflict can be extremely costly, weakening and unsettling for both sides. Thus, the Parifonds, through its emancipating functions as well as through the dependencies those functions simultaneously create, indeed serves, as noted above, as the "the glue holding everything together".

Importing Labor Power: the Bilateral Agreements and the Question of Labor

A further institutional sphere relevant to our topic, one interlocked with the above institutions of the CLA, concerns that of migration. As noted above, due to the simultaneously mobile as well as stationary structure of the construction industry, the process of production cannot be outsourced. Not only that, because of the real difficulties in recruiting labor power at home, the great mass thereof must in fact be "imported" (Kelley 2017). This is, however, of course not an isolated question of economic demand, but a social phenomenon transcending the narrow borders of the industry itself and revealing itself as an intertwined meeting of the economic with the

political. While the articulation thereof may be different depending on space and time, the question of labor migration is always one demanding the state to master a tense balancing act between securing the economic needs of capital's thirst for migrant labor power (Harvey 2010) and its role as "the fulcrum of contention between social actors" (Polanyi in Tarrow 2011: 77), thus acting as a "regulator of capitalism" (ibid). This will become clearer later on.

For the majority of the 20th century, the flow of labor power in construction was channeled by the so-called *Saisonnierstatut*. This law, today widely perceived as controversial, was in power between 1934 and 2002. It saw limited quotas of migrant workers be given temporary, seasonal work permits without the immediate right to permanent residence. The quotas were determined according to the needs of each industry and were distributed as such. These Saisonnier-workers were only allowed to reside in the country for a certain amount of time, at one point for a maximum of nine months, and were thus particularly attractive for seasonal industries such as construction. Often housed in shanty-like *Baracken*, today the very symbol of the Saisonnier-era, these workers had few legal rights. They were not allowed to change their employer nor their residency during their stay and could only apply for a permanent residency permit after a number of years. It was only then that these workers could bring their partners and children.

From the 1970s on, when organized labor started to take a more open approach to migrant questions (Steinauer and Von Allmen 2000), Swiss trade unions were at the forefront of the struggle against the Saisonnierstatut. This resistance was, on the one hand, due to the growing influence of the labor left, but in time was also a result of very strategic calculations that migrant workers with more rights would be less exposed to employer threats during periods of industrial strife. In time, despite this struggle having started as a leftist, humanitarian project, the economic liberals of the country also began to gradually distance themselves from a system that in their eyes had outlived its usefulness and was a too rigid system with its infamous quotas.

Thus, the writing appeared to be on the wall for the Saisonnier-system. Following years of negotiation, in 1999 Switzerland and the European Union, of which the former is not a part, finally agreed upon an accord of bilateral agreements. Touching upon a range of topics, one of the most important as well as controversial elements

thereof concerned the free movement of workers between Switzerland and the EU. It allowed, among other things, for European citizens to seek employment under the same conditions as Swiss citizens and take up indefinite residency in Switzerland – and the other way around.

As noted above, the unions had been vehement opponents of what in their eyes was a discriminatory Saisonnierstatut. Thus, as soon as the end of that system became apparent, the unions were more than relieved. This particularly concerned the Construction and Industry Union, which by that time was not only one of the more progressive of the Swiss unions, but also one representing a substantial migrant membership. That being said, the union's official position towards the new bilateral agreements was (and continues to be) an ambiguous one. For despite ending the discriminatory Saisonnier-system, the bilateral agreements with the EU were in their core an economically liberal project. As such, the agreements did not simply regularize the Saisonnier-workers that were already in the country, but opened up the national borders of the labor market in general. By doing so, this in effect provided Swiss capital unlimited access to a seemingly endless "reservoir of labor power" (Schiavi 2013: 112ff). Given that the economy in the neighboring countries of the EU was not only far less stable, but that working conditions and wages were generally lower than in Switzerland, particularly in construction, this massive widening of the labor market simultaneously represented a potentially serious threat to the wages and working conditions of workers in Switzerland.

Yet as one union official who has long been active on issues concerning migration put it:

> Is it a threat? Yes, of course it is. We would be naïve to think otherwise. But by saying no to the bilateral agreements, does that do away with the threat? Of course not. It would be equally naïve to think that the bosses would not otherwise get access to labor, including cheap labor, some way or another. This is sometimes hard to explain to our Swiss colleagues, but because the bilateral agreements actually give the migrants much more political rights, this is actually good for all workers concerned. That's because it means they are less susceptible to the blackmail of the employers. They can stand up for their rights and can thus less be used simply as a cheap labor substitute for more pricy Swiss labor power. So what we have to do is to take the good parts of

this new system and try and contain the side-effects of it. And that is what we have been trying to do ever since.

In fact, the heterogeneous political composition at the time of the bilateral agreements' establishment and the complex balance of power concerning the question thereof led to what in the end resulted in a "remarkable power play" by the unions (Rieger 2010: 13). While the support of the liberal and centrist parties for the bilateral agreements was clear and the official position of the federal government was equally explicit, there was a substantial amount of unease in the wider population. These fears were particularly held by working class Swiss, many of them union members (or ones the union sought to organize), who were fearsome their jobs would be up for grabs once the free movement of workers became reality. Up until today, many Swiss construction workers are indeed extremely critical when it comes to any opening of national (and thus labor market) borders.

Given that the bilateral agreements had to be ratified in a popular vote, the political elite pushing the project, i.e. the liberal and centrist parties, in fact had good reason to worry, especially when taking into account Switzerland's voting history on migration topics. It was particularly alarmed given that the rightwing national conservatives, led by the so-called Swiss Peoples Party, had tapped into the above noted fears and were mobilizing for a no-vote in the upcoming referendum. In this particular situation, the balance of power seemed to lay in a rather surprising place: in the hands of organized labor and the political left. If the Social Democrats and especially the unions publically supported the deal, it might pass. If they too mobilized against it, the bilateral agreements seemed doomed to fail. This put the labor movement in a unique position of strategic opportunity – one it immediately seized with little hesitation. Ultimately, this exceptional situation of unexpected societal power led to a strengthening of the unions' institutional power.

Equipped with these newfound bargaining chips, the unions and Social Democrats immediately went into negotiations with their temporary liberal allies. By shifting the debate concerning the threat to wages and working conditions away from a xenophobic direction and framing it as a question of "protecting wages not borders", the unions, again led by the then Construction and Industry Union, were able to negotiate the introduction of so-called *Flankierende Massnahmen (*flanking

measures). Following the explicit goal of protecting working people from the "abusive undercutting of Swiss wages and working conditions"[13], these measures oblige non-Swiss companies to uphold minimal working conditions and brought about new legal instruments of labor inspection and regulation. Among other things, it has made it easier for the state to declare CLAs generally binding and has also led to a higher number of and more systematic labor inspections in industries with already generally binding CLAs.

Having achieved this victory, unique throughout Europe, the unions and the political left threw their support behind the ratification of the bilateral agreements. In the end, the bilateral agreements were ratified in the popular vote and with them came the introduction of the flanking measures in 2004.

Since then, especially Unia has – rather successfully – campaigned for an enhancement of these flanking measures. Besides some smaller steps forward, such as raising the number of inspections in diverse industries, one of their biggest coups has been the introduction of the previously noted *Solidarhaftung*, solidary liability, making prime contractors in construction partially liable for the labor violations of their subcontractors. While the law was not nearly as strict as it ought to be in the eyes of the union, from a power relations perspective it was nonetheless significant given that this mechanism was introduced exclusively for construction and against the vehement opposition of the construction employers. Not only that, this had been a key demand of the union which it had not been able to push through during the CLA-negotiations in 2011/2012. After this defeat at the industry's negotiating table, the union had shifted its efforts to public campaigning in order to pressure the Swiss parliament into introducing the law. It did so, besides lobbying and bargaining, by systematically uncovering and very publically scandalizing cases of CLA violations, so-called *wage-dumping*. It also collected over 27'000 signatures on construction sites across the country for a petition supporting the law. While some of the firms caught violating the CLA were foreign companies, the new law de facto had little to do with migration per se as it counts for Swiss as well as foreign companies, thus

[13] Swiss government website on the flanking measures. https://www.personenfreizuegigkeit.admin.ch/fza/de/home/aufenthalt_und_arbeitsmarkt/flankierende_massnahmen.html (4.4.2017)

pointing to the wider significance of the flanking measures, despite their narrow origin in migration politics.

From a power relations perspective, the introduction of these flanking measures, in particular their enhancement with the solidary liability, can be read as the strategic capturing of a unique situation arising from wider political dynamics (Wyler 2012), which at least in this case served to substitute for the union's then too weak associational power. Through a balanced mix of public campaigning and political bargaining, the union had managed to widen the institutional web protecting labor rights.

Moving back to the construction sites themselves, a further change unfolding in the arena of migrant labor was that of a growing heterogenization thereof, i.e. a growing and more balanced variety of different nationalities. While also a product of the widening of the labor market through the bilateral agreements, these changes had already began to unfold in the late 1970s and 1980s. On the one hand it started when the first unemployment waves hit the country and many of the Italian workers either voluntarily or forcibly returned to their former home. This process was intensified during the severe construction crisis in the mid-1990s. It was furthermore supported by the fact that the Italian economic situation was simultaneously improving itself. On the other hand, even during the Saisonnier-era it had become easier for immigrants of other European countries to enter Switzerland. One of the groups whose immigration would rise to particularly high levels was that of the Portuguese.

Beyond the quantitative world of statistics, however, this change had very palpable effects on the social sphere of the construction world. One of the most important ones thereof, which had a strong effect on a number of aspects, concerned the gradual loss of the Italian language as the "lingua franca" (Steinauer and Von Allmen 2000: 58) of the industry. It is, ironically, well described by Admir, a young Albanian construction worker:

> My father came here as a Saisonnier many years ago. It was not easy for our family, because we couldn't come with him then, but we survived. He actually learned a lot back then. Among other things Italian [laughs]. I mean, we just thought this was hilarious. He went to Zurich in Switzerland and yeah, he learned German later on, but

first he learned Italian. Can you believe it?! I mean, I work construction too now, but I don't speak Italian. But back then, there were just so many Italians… It was like the construction language. Know what I mean?

A similar account was given by Alessandro, a retired Italian construction worker and union activist:

I learned German rather late. When I'm at Unia assemblies, I still listen to the translation in Italian and when I speak, I prefer to do it in Italian. But when I started working here, back in 1977, you just did not need to speak German. I mean, in construction you were either Italian or you were something else, but you spoke Italian – or needed to learn it fast! Even the Swiss foremen spoke Italian. We worked in Italian and even union meetings were held in Italian. It was… the first language of construction! It's not really like that anymore.

Thus, the changes in migration in the 1970s through to the 1990s not only altered the migratory patterns and the ethnic makeup of construction labor, making it more ethnically heterogeneous, but also slowly dissolved its "lingua franca". While the Portuguese today make up a large portion of the workforce, Portuguese has not assumed the same function as that Italian once had, and since many Portuguese workers still perceive themselves as temporary residents planning to someday return home, a strong motivation to learn German is not necessarily widespread (Fibbi et al. 2010). This biblical "confusion of tongues" led the newspaper *Tagesanzeiger* to sum up the situation as follows: "Swiss construction sites are like the tower of Babel. Whereas it used to be Italians and Yugoslavs working, there are now close to a dozen languages to be heard." (Merkt 2016: 18).

Under these circumstances, it has not only become more difficult for workers to communicate among themselves, often seeing foremen giving instructions through long lines of informal translators (i.e. through other workers who speak German as well as the language in question), but also presents a serious challenge for the union itself in its ambitions to organize the workers into a collective force capable of concerted action. Furthermore, this linguistic barrier has also emphasized national-boundaries, leading to particular ethnic or linguistic groups often socializing primarily among themselves. This is often articulated by certain rest containers being used by one linguistic/nationality-group, such as the Portuguese, and others being used by other groups, such as Swiss, Albanian or Polish workers.

As we have now been able to see, the question of migration plays a vital role in construction, both for the industry as well as for the trade union organizing in it. This role is, however, an ambiguous and many-faced one, touching upon a number of aspects. On the one hand, as elaborated upon in the previous chapter, it generated a wave of worker activists politicized in postwar Italy. It was this generation that played an important role in the union's returned focus on associational power and industrial conflict. Equally important for the union, yet stemming from a completely different angle, the controversies surrounding migration and its role in the labor market in fact paradoxically strengthened the union's institutional power after it seized a unique opportunity provided by its unexpected place in the balance of power. On the other hand, today's heterogenization of migration patterns, leading to the banal but decisive loss of the industry's "lingua franca" (Steinauer and Von Allmen 2000: 58), have produced challenges not only for the organization of work, but also the organization of the workers by the union. Furthermore, the seemingly endless "reservoir of labor power" (Schiavi 2013: 112ff) produced by the bilateral agreements has also, as will become clear, presented challenges in the realm of wage-dumping and other CLA-violations. This is, however, embedded in a far greater process unfolding in construction, one that will now be explored.

"Mala Edilizia": Sick Construction

As of the 1990s, the neoliberal upheaval unfolding throughout the Western political economy, as described in the previous chapter, began to strike roots in Swiss construction (Pelizzari 2010; Schiavi 2013; Kelley 2012; 2014a; 2014b; 2017). The timing of this ensuing change, the mid-1990s, was not only the era when neoliberalism finally began to establish itself as a dominant ideology in Switzerland's political-economy, but also just after the perhaps hardest crisis Swiss construction had ever experienced, one that had just ravaged the industry and cut its workforce in two (Schweizerischer Baumeisterverband 2011: 17). As an intertwined result of both this "neoliberal conversion" (Knöpfel in Pfister 2010: 205) on the one hand and a tougher economic situation in construction on the other, a fierce principle of competition by any means necessary slowly but surely came to rise as the guiding force of the industry. This would, rather quickly in fact, snowball into a process "shaking the very foundations of the construction site world" (Pelizzari 2010: 171). As will become evident, these changes have had a severe impact both on the individual

workers themselves, yet also distinct effects on the workers as a collective social group – and thus for the union organizing it.

Due to the labor intensity of the construction industry, it is a truism that any heightened competition between companies will, as far as the institutions within which it is embedded allow for it (i.e. the legal environment, the CLA), largely be fought out on the level of labor power and the cost thereof. This is of course particularly the case when ingrained in a growing neoliberal discourse aimed at "recommoditizing labor" (Standing 2007). As a result, we are today witnessing a structural upheaval unfolding in the Swiss construction industry that in its essence represents a multilayered process of a *precarization* of labor. While especially the industry's CLA and to a certain extent the concessions granted in the flanking measures have been able to dampen this development, in their current form they have as of yet not been sufficient to truly stop it. With some media and union observers have come to dub the construction industry "the Wild West" or even speak of a "crime scene construction" (Conzett and Gruhnwald 2017) in reference to the growing chaos of labor violations, on many construction sites this worrying state has become known as *mala edilizia*: sick construction.

Generally articulated along a creed of "the cheaper one wins" (Kelley 2012; 2014a), with companies cutting prices and building-time in order to win highly competitive bids, this still unfolding process of reducing and flexibilizing labor costs has come to involve both somewhat banal as well as deeply profound labor changes on both a legal as well as illegal level.

One of the most mundane yet simultaneously widespread steps of this process has been to ensure that a significantly smaller number of workers carries out a far greater work load. In other words, smaller construction teams are assigned to do more work. And indeed, since the great crisis in the 1990s, when the number of workers in construction was basically cut in two, the total number of workers on site has generally speaking not recovered – despite record economic growth in the industry itself (see figure two).

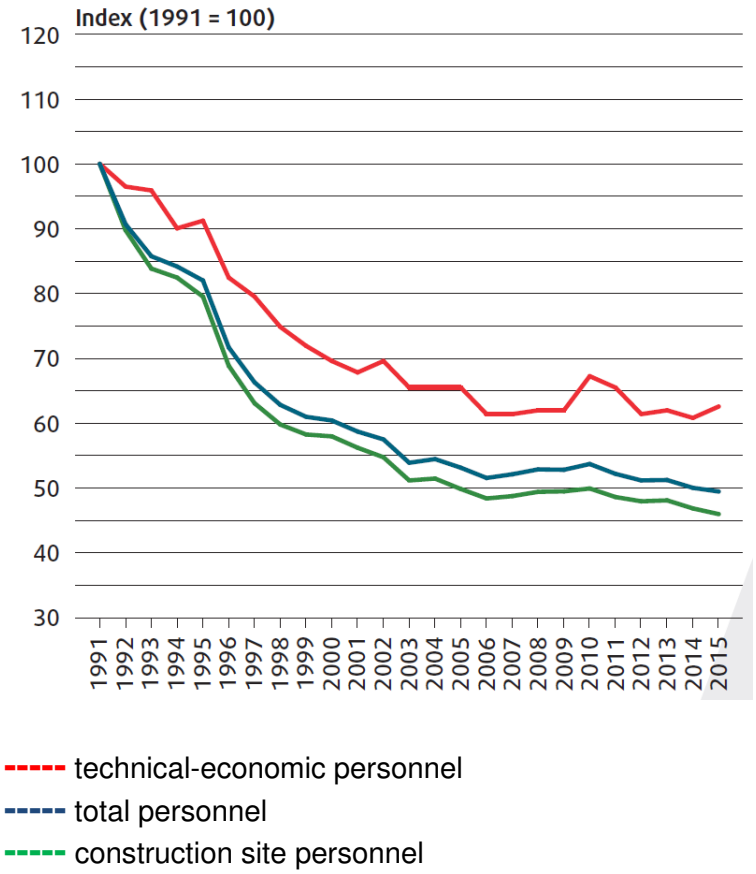


Figure 4: Personnel statistics in the main construction industry in percent
Source: Schweizerischer Baumeisterverband (2016: 40), own translation of legend

While the changing ratio between labor power and construction activity can to a certain extent be attributed to a rise of mechanization on the construction sites, representing an increase in *labor productivity* (Marx 1990), the volume thereof paired with the rather sluggish process of mechanization in construction suggests that it is equally traceable to a broader culture of speed ups, in other words an increase in *labor intensity* (Marx 1990), (Kelley 2012). In any case, this trend towards "more work, less workers" is most definitely something explicitly noticed and felt by the workers themselves. Throughout my years of activity and fieldwork in the construction industry and despite heated discussions on a number of different subjects, the topic of doing more in less time has been one mentioned by almost all of my informants, independent of their particular position in the labor process or their feelings towards the union.

"You do the same thing with two people today that you would have done with five a couple of years ago!", as Giovanni put it, a veteran construction worker with decades of experience on the job, yet something that has been articulated in similar terms in

countless other conversations. “Construction has always been hard work.”, he continued, “But today, you can feel the vibrations of it in your bones. And I don’t mean the actual feeling when you are operating a jackhammer or plate compactor [machine used to level base foundations]. I mean knowing you are always on the clock, always running after the things you were supposed to have been done with yesterday. Always worrying…”

Besides more hectic and stressful work situations, this change has seen more and more companies not only ordering overtime, but regularly working on Saturdays as well. Furthermore, in order to expand their market, more and more regional companies are taking contracts in other parts of the country, thus leading to the above noted gradual trans-regionalization of the industry and making workers’ daily commutes significantly longer. Before and after a long day of manual labor, long hours of commuting can be absolutely energy-draining.

And while these speed ups with less workers have no doubt had a palpable effect on the crews themselves, it is in fact the foremen that have perhaps absorbed this pressure the most. A surprising number of foremen confessed to me that the growing time pressure is not only “breaking them”, but also regularly causing sleepless nights. Every now and then, one will also hear of a foreman who suffered a nervous breakdown or burnout and is now in a recovery clinic. Given the rather prevalent “hard man”-culture in construction, I was at first rather surprised at this honesty and openness.

Besides this speed-up culture and growing shear between construction activity and the number of workers carrying it out, the precarization of labor in construction has primarily been unfolding on two other levels, each interlinked with the other: temporary labor and subcontracting. While both developments have become increasingly visible throughout the wider economy since the unfolding of the neoliberal conversion, both in Switzerland and globally, their prevalence in Swiss construction is significant. Besides their immediate effects on the financial and job-security situations of the workers themselves, both phenomena question the very foundations that have long dominated labor-capital relations in the capitalist economy.

Since the mid-1990s, temporary labor has significantly risen in Swiss construction (Bianchi and Lampart 2007: 13) and has come to represent an important pillar of how the industry actually works. Around twelve percent of all temporary workers in Switzerland are employed in the main construction trades, meaning roughly 10'000 full-time equivalents (Rahm 2016a: 52). Dismantling any direct relationship of employment between worker and employer, temporary labor sees construction companies de facto "rent" workers through personnel agencies instead of indefinitely and directly hiring them themselves. From capital's perspective, this provides a remarkably flexible tool, as workers can be temporarily borrowed according to the specific workload of the company at the specific time and place. In a seasonal industry such as construction, this is of particular significance. As a result, the *entrepreneurial risk* of the employer is passed from the construction company to the personnel agency, which passes that on to the worker himself given the short notice periods for employment terminations involved.

From labor's perspective, this represents a severe precarization of workers' statuses as sellers of labor power. For despite the fact that even temporary workers fall under the industry's CLA and must thus (in theory) be guaranteed minimum wages, holiday time, etc., they are nonetheless in a far more precarious state than their permanently employed colleagues. If we remember Marx's insight of workers as being free in a double sense (Marx 1990), both from feudal chains as well as means of production, these temporary workers are free in yet another way. They are free of any direct and binding contractual relationship to their employer (Kelley 2012), thus breaking "the mutual dependency between workers and employers that has been so central to the labor movement in the past" (Wills 2009: 444).

Because of this indirect and temporary employment, these workers are not only continuously passed from construction site to construction site, but can also be laid off in just a number of days[14]. During the icy winter months, when construction activity generally slows down, the vast majority of these workers are indeed laid off and in most cases return to living off of unemployment benefits. This process is repeated year after year. As a result and since temporary workers are generally paid

[14] A further negative aspect of temporary labor is a strong correlation between temporary workers and a higher than average accident risk, especially among those with less job experience (Studer et al. 2009).

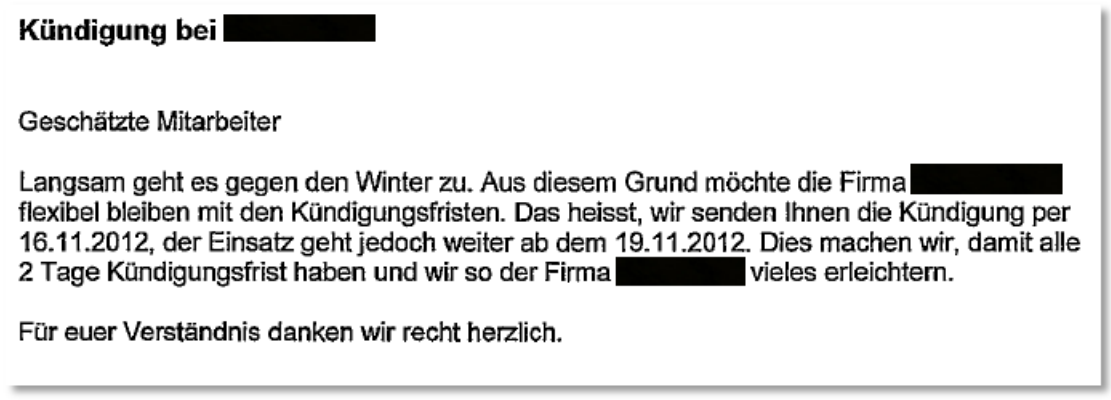
by the hour, many try to collect as many hours as possible during spring, summer and fall. There are, of course, some temporary workers, especially younger bachelors, who profess to preferring such work as it allows them to work when they want. Yet for the great majority of temporary construction workers I talked to, temporary labor is either a last resort or an attempt to prove themselves to potential employers, thus hoping to get permanently hired somewhere down the road.

One such worker, who works temporarily for one of the largest building companies in Switzerland, showed me a letter he regularly receives from the personnel agency that directly employs him:

Dear employees

The winter months are soon before us. For this reason, the company XY [construction company's name] wishes to remain flexible concerning periods of notice. This means that we will terminate your employment as of the 16.11.2012, your employment will continue, however, as of the 19.11.2012. We are doing this so everybody has a termination period of two days and we are thus able to make things easier for the company XY.

We cordially thank you for your understanding.



Kündigung bei [redacted]

Geschätzte Mitarbeiter

Langsam geht es gegen den Winter zu. Aus diesem Grund möchte die Firma [redacted] flexibel bleiben mit den Kündigungsfristen. Das heisst, wir senden Ihnen die Kündigung per 16.11.2012, der Einsatz geht jedoch weiter ab dem 19.11.2012. Dies machen wir, damit alle 2 Tage Kündigungsfrist haben und wir so der Firma [redacted] vieles erleichtern.

Für euer Verständnis danken wir recht herzlich.

Figure 5: Letter from a personnel agency translated above
Source: worker informant

As long as the construction economy remains in a steady state of growth, as is currently the case, temporary workers can generally rely on having work between the months of March and December. However, the general precariousness of this state is immense, both on a material as well as emotional level. For they are very well

aware that if anything should happen to the economy or the company, they will be the first to go. As Pedro, another temporarily employed construction worker, puts it:

> Yeah, I have work today. Yeah, I will probably have work tomorrow. But if anything happens, if the company loses an important contract or something, I am going to be the first told to leave. And I know that. Everybody knows it. I've got one foot in the job and one foot in unemployment. My wife goes crazy because we are having our third child now. But it's not only that. It's also a question of dignity. I am passed around from construction site to construction site and I am – as all temporary workers are – always on the outside, not really belonging.

These two aspects, a high degree of precariousness and a sense of "not-belonging" to the core team of workers, despite being embedded in those teams for the duration of deployment, are both consistently reoccurring themes when speaking with temporary workers. For not only are the workers aware that they will be the first to go if the company's workload is reduced, they are often socially marginalized and in some cases even stigmatized. Some of the permanent employees perceive their temporary colleagues as a kind of second-class worker or are simply frustrated when "another new temporary" has to be integrated into the team and shown the ropes, only to be moved off to another team soon thereafter.

José, another temporary worker, recounts how:

> I've worked at Meier [construction company, pseudonym] for four years now – four years. But temporary. I know everybody, I work with them, but I'm still not invited to the company's annual barbeque. Everybody goes, but I don't. I'm not invited, none of the temporary workers are. It's humiliating. And then I'm let go every December for two months and have to beg the government for money. Then back to construction in March. Is that even legal?!

While some of these personnel agencies are large and generally professional corporations, others are smaller offices surviving off of their informal networks and direct contacts to construction companies. Many of these agencies also cooperate closely with regional unemployment offices (Marti et al. 2003: 165) in order to systematically recruit labor power from the otherwise unemployed, thus building a profitable bridge between traditional employers and Marx's "reserve army of labor" (Kelley 2012).

Despite the fact that temporary workers also fall under the industry's CLA, it is not uncommon for personnel agencies to "forget" certain regulations thereof (Pelizzari 2010). While not necessarily entailing more obvious CLA-violations, such as undercutting minimum wages, other offenses such as failing to pay overtime benefits, lunch expenses, etc. are common. Furthermore, personnel agencies will often regularly change a worker's place of employment from one of the agency's offices to another, so as to avoid paying travel expenses. Taking an even darker turn, the industry is also full of whispers concerning individual project managers of construction companies who run their own personnel agencies "on the side" and use their managerial positions to rent out workers to their own projects, thus earning substantial sums of money per worker next to their normal salary as project manager.

Besides temporary employment, a second instrument of labor recommodification has become an increasingly inherent part of the industry: subcontracting. Also representing a global feature of neoliberal capitalism (Hann and Hart 2011: 151), subcontracting has become just as prevalent as temporary labor, yet often with even more precarious dimensions. Like temporary labor, subcontracting companies also fall under the industry's CLA, as all companies working construction do. That being said, in these often small companies largely made up of unskilled and migrant workers, violations of the CLA are known to occur on a regular basis (Conzett 2016). Almost all of the most prominent and public wage-dumping cases uncovered by the union in the past few years have involved such subcontracting companies.

Like temporary labor, subcontracting's position in the construction industry has risen significantly since the mid-1990s, after construction's crisis and when neoliberalism began to dominate the political economy in Switzerland. Generally speaking, subcontracting in Swiss construction is when a main building company outsources parts of its work to other, usually (though not exclusively) smaller companies, i.e. subcontractors. This may concern more difficult or specialized tasks, yet more often than not applies to the repetitive and "unskilled" tasks of installing iron-reinforcements and wooden boarding. It is either done by setting a fixed lump sum or a piecework-price depending on the amount of iron or bricks laid. In a similar logic, the workers of subcontracting firms are usually paid by the hour, seldom much more than the lowest minimum wages, yet can earn a bonus if they work particularly fast.

Some subcontracting firms, extending the same rationale as their prime contractors did towards them, have found it lucrative to not necessarily complete the work themselves, but to pass it on to yet other subcontracting firms at an even lower price. As a result, complex and seemingly endless subcontracting-chains can arise.

While this phenomenon may at first seem uncontroversial, such a model economically only makes sense when the various stations of these subcontracting chains are able to pass the job down at a lower price, so as to still make a profit despite not doing the actual work (Kelley 2017). Thus, besides the fact that the original prices/bids offered by prime contractors tend to be notoriously low to begin with, each transfer down the subcontracting chain produces further pressure to reduce costs. Again, due to the labor-intensive aspect of construction, in particular in the repetitive tasks outsourced to subcontracting companies, costs are often and sometimes exclusively reduced in the realm of labor power. Thus, as a result of this price pressure, which is often initiated by the prime contractor, yet reproduced and intensified at each level of subcontractors, CLA violations have become a common, if not even inherent feature of subcontracting in the Swiss construction industry.

The term *Lohndumping* (wage-dumping) has come to describe the wider phenomenon of undercutting CLA-regulations. This can, in a more classic sense, mean paying less than the obligatory minimum wage, yet it can also involve longer hours than specified, less or no holiday time, failing to pay overtime-benefits, etc. Despite its political touch, the term wage-dumping is in fact a rather apt term to point to the overarching consequences thereof. For if a prime contractor passes work down to a Slovakian subcontractor that pays its workers too little wages, then obviously these workers themselves are effected. However, this simultaneously serves to “dump” the wages and wage-level of all workers in the industry by – in time – lowering the market price of labor power. As a result, significant pressure can arise on all workers’ wages and working conditions. While it is meanwhile generally accepted by both the union and employers that wage-dumping is a serious problem in construction, the actual depth thereof is difficult to quantify given the inherent shadow-character of the phenomenon (Conzett 2016).

Two characteristics of the construction industry make it particularly susceptible for wage-dumping (Bosch and Zühlke-Robinet 2000: 23). First of all, due to

construction's labor intensity on the one hand and the sometimes significant pay gap between Switzerland and other European countries, wage-dumping can be a lucrative scam for the subcontractors involved, who in turn offer prime contractors low prices. Second of all, due to construction's "travelling factories" (Bosch and Zühlke-Robinet 2000: 23), involving highly mobile teams (especially in the areas of iron- and boarding-installments) that change sites every week or even day, it is often difficult to detect violations committed by these often smaller companies. According to Pelizzari (2010: 172), labor inspections have found that one in four construction firms have paid under the minimum wages prescribed by the CLA and even one out of two temporary agencies have done so. The leftist-leaning newspaper *Woz* even went so far as to decry what they saw as "mafia methods on Swiss construction sites", noting that some subcontractors simply did not pay their workers at all or were even using pseudo self-employed workers (so-called *Ich-AGs* or *Me-Incorporateds*) to circumvent minimum wages, physically threatening any workers who complained (Fagetti 2015). While the workers themselves are almost always migrant workers, the Swiss prime contractors outsourcing tasks to these subcontractors "wash their hands free of guilt" (ibid).

Perhaps even more so than temporary labor, the growing role of subcontracting has substantially changed how Swiss construction works. In today's Swiss construction world, it has become almost impossible to find a construction site upon which subcontractors do not play a substantial if not even vital role in the labor process. While the larger companies often use their core teams to do the bulk of the construction coordination and especially more skilled tasks, iron and boarding installments and often even brick-laying are often almost universally outsourced to cheaper subcontractors. This was, however, not always the case, but is indeed a newer development: "As taken for granted as it used to be that a builder [company] would perform all main construction tasks itself, it is just as self-evident for him today that iron-reinforcements and masonry will be done by subcontractors." (Rahm 2016b: 54).

This trend is directly reflected in what can only be described as an explosion of the number of (small) companies operating in Swiss construction. While since the industry's crisis in the mid-1990s the number of workers has remained rather stable, especially since the turn of the millennium, the number of companies itself seems to

have significantly risen (Baumann 2015). Taken together, this points to a strong atomization-tendency of the industry. While this does not necessarily contradict the general tendency towards monopoly capitalism noted by Burawoy (1979) and many other Marxist scholars, considering that the larger companies still retain control of the bulk of the market as prime contractors, it does suggest that in neoliberal capitalism, the term *monopoly* may point more towards *market control* than an actually carrying out all of the work secured on that market in a productive sense.

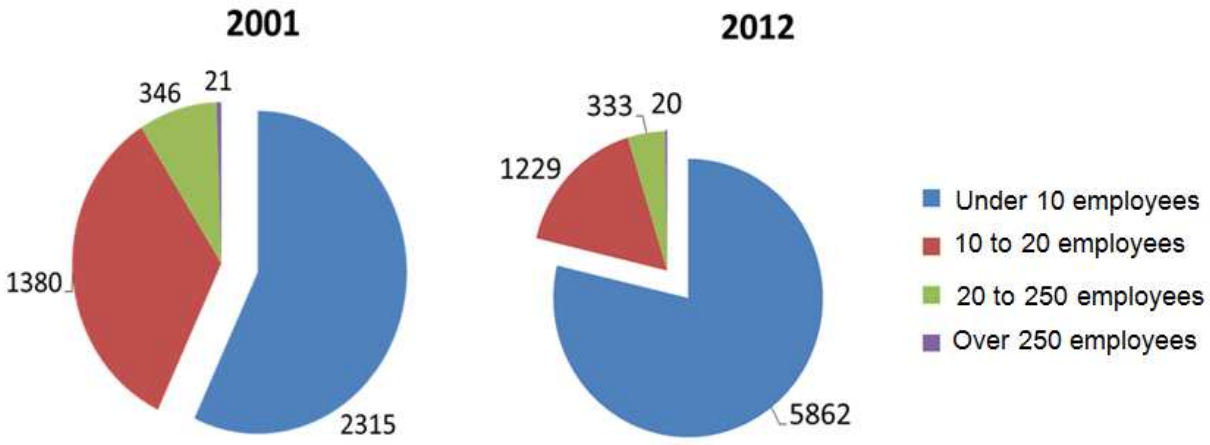


Figure 6: Number of above-ground construction companies according to size
Source: Baumann (2015: 4), own illustration

As CLA-violations are seldom directly committed by the larger, more established companies, but far more often by their smaller subcontracting firms, the former are able to distance themselves from any legal wrongdoing, especially if they can prove they formally "instructed" their subcontractors to respect the CLA. In the eyes of the union, however, these larger companies and prime contractors are often just as complicate as they not only encourage such behavior by demanding unrealistically cheap prices, but also because "any idiot can see that they do not give a damn about the rules of the *Landesmantelvertrag* [construction's CLA]! It's as if somebody tells you to get from Bern to Zurich in 10 minutes [a distance of 120 kilometers], but not to break the speed limit. It's physically not possible.", as one labor inspector put it (in Kelley 2017).

It is precisely as a response to these developments that Unia has attempted to negotiate the introduction of stricter measures against wage-dumping and has, when negotiations with employers have failed, campaigned for the state to do so or even

introduced such instruments itself, such as its controversial *Department for Risk Analysis*. However, while Unia and the construction employers definitely do not have a completely congruent vision of how CLA-violations ought to be tackled, it would be equally wrong to suggest that all employers are a priori uninterested in (stricter) measures against CLA-violations. That being said, employers' stances towards the phenomenon of wage-dumping are both as heterogeneous as they are ambiguous and in the end represent a collective action problem of their own. Let us take a closer look.

On the one hand, as actors in an increasingly fierce cycle of time and price pressure, construction companies – whether they like it or not – are forced to "compete or lose" as one employer put it to me. This is less a moral question than one stemming from the general laws of capitalism reflected in Marx's "coercive laws of competition" (in Harvey 2010: 146ff.; Kelley 2012). Confronting the individual capitalist "as a coercive force external to him" (Harvey 2010: 146), companies are sucked into participating in the same or preferably even cheaper labor practices than their competitors. This is, however, not necessarily in the long-term interest of companies as it can – as we see in construction today – easily lead to a more destructive or ruinous competition, one in which not only labor is aggrieved, but also profit margins themselves may sink. That being said, any company seeking to *individually* free itself from this cycle would be disciplined by the market as it would no longer be competitive. So, while many companies might sincerely prefer a less vicious competition in their own very rational interests, it is individually irrational to take the first step themselves.

It is here where the CLA – and thus paradoxically organized labor – steps in. As the CLA provides competing companies with certain "rules of the game", it serves to stabilize an otherwise shaky slope. This is particularly the case today, where the bilateral agreements with the EU have not only opened up a large reservoir of labor, but also an open market in general, one that would bring about even harsher competition if the CLA were not in existence. So, while employers do not necessarily want the same concrete CLA-standards the union wants (such as higher wages, more protection during bad weather, etc.), many do want *some form of standards* as opposed to open and "wild" competition. As Erik Olin Wright (2000) suggests, it is here that organized labor can play a role in solving capital's own collective action problems. This is, in fact, an aspect even pointed out by Marx, emphasizing that the

collective power of labor can “save the capitalists from their own individual stupidity and short-sightedness“ (paraphrased in Harvey 2010: 157).

The empirical reality of this dilemma is, of course, just as in cases of labor’s collective action, slightly more complex as well as ambivalent and construction employers are, depending on their size as well as strategy, deeply heterogeneous and may thus have more or less interest in a CLA. It would furthermore be wrong to completely dismiss the role of ideology in sometimes blurring or at least slightly deferring employers’ rational interests (Wolf 1999). Furthermore, again returning to the individual level, the very real time and price pressure can obviously lead even the most correct companies to “look away from obvious wage-dumping on their construction sites if the price is right”, as one employer phrased it.

That being said, it can be safely assumed that the great majority of construction employers see the industry’s CLA as a necessary tool serving their own direct interests. While they do not necessarily agree with the union on how to fill the CLA, i.e. *what* rules of the game should exist, they do want *rules in general*, thus viewing the CLA as a stabilizing institution preventing an even fiercer competition. This dependency of course, paradoxically, strengthens the union’s structural power, as it can under circumstances use it as leverage before and during “contractless periods”, when the CLA has or is about to expire.

“Like Milano at 12”

As described above, while construction’s CLA has undoubtedly prevented an even greater upheaval, phenomena such as temporary labor, subcontracting and CLA-violations in the form of wage-dumping have not only changed the very workings of the industry, but have also had a grave effect on thousands of individual workers. Yet this process of precarization has simultaneously produced and continues to produce just as significant consequences for the workers as a collective whole. This is in turn, as will become evident, especially relevant for the union’s own organizing efforts and thus its associational power.

By creating new types of employment aimed at cheapening and flexibilizing labor, neoliberal labor practices have had far-ranging consequences, be that in Swiss construction or elsewhere. They have not only shifted the price and conditions of capital’s acquisition of labor power, as described above, but simultaneously altered

the social realities of labor. Furthermore, and in vivid contrast to Marx and Engels' predictions (1969) of a growingly homogeneous working class, these practices have often created a "fragmented and disorganized labor force" (Hyman in Ariovich 2007: 17) and a general "fragmentation of social experience" (Deppe 2012: 51f.). This process is acutely visible in the Swiss construction industry today (Kelley 2012; 2014a; 2014b). In the words of Toni, a construction worker who has served the industry for decades, Swiss construction has become "Like Milano at 12 – absolute chaos!" (in Kelley 2012; 2014a).

Generally speaking, while "precariousness is everywhere" (Bourdieu 1998) and this wave of precarization has indeed touched the entire industry, it has done so in very different ways, depending on the individual worker's position in the production process (Kelley 2012; 2014a; 2014b). At the same time, whether permanent worker, temporary laborer or employee of a subcontracting company, each only gains its social relevance and meaning through the co-existence and contrasting difference of the other (Kelley 2012). This is, however, not a unifying meaning, but a fragmenting one and the realities flowing therefrom can produce very different perceptions as well as individual strategies. As Bloch points out, "[…] people will act in the world, not in terms of what it is actually like, but in terms of what they see it as being like." (1983: 135).

In the eyes of permanent workers in Swiss construction as well as in the empirical context of production, the former are – in contrast to their temporary and subcontractor colleagues – the "core workers" (*Stammbelegschaft*) of the industry. Not only are they seen as generally more skilled and qualified and are often well aware of their *cultural capital* (Bourdieu 2002) in this regard, they are also the ones so far most shielded from the direct effects of the precarization described above. In contrast to other workers, they have a fixed monthly income, are able to count on having a job throughout the year and generally profit the most from the benefits set in the CLA. Most are very aware of this, which is sometimes articulated in a self-confident attitude.

That being said, despite a perhaps superficial security, during longer discussions a somewhat apprehensive posture can also emerge. The latter is well summarized by Reto, a Swiss construction worker employed by a larger company:

Let's be honest. If a crisis hits tomorrow or if the firm just doesn't have that much work to do, they [temporary workers, subcontractors] are going to be the first to go. And for some of them, that's really too bad. Some work really hard. Others are just interested in the quick money. But if you look at it in the long-term, who says they won't *replace us*?

It is with workers like Reto that the union's demand for a limitation of temporary work and subcontracting has fallen on particularly sympathetic ears. Besides the more direct arena of precarization, however, there are a number of other questions of high importance for permanent workers – most if not all are at least indirectly tied to their particular status and reality as permanent employees.

First of all, as workers who in most cases intend to spend their professional lives in construction, the industry's early retirement scheme is both an emotionally as well as rationally important issue. As a result and as will become clear later on, the participation of these workers in the campaign of 2015 was an important pillar of its ultimate success. Secondly, regular salary increases are, hardly surprisingly, just as important. This is, however, particularly relevant due to the fact that permanent employees are paid fixed monthly wages. Third of all and on the other hand, precisely because of their fixed wages, many are often less thrilled at the thought of doing overtime and Saturday work. While this overtime is compensated for with overtime-pay, many permanent employees, especially those with families, have long pushed the union to negotiate stricter caps on hours exceeding the annual working calendar. Last but not least, and also not completely separable from the permanent status and fixed monthly wages of these employees, clearer criteria as to when to stop working during bad weather is often cited as an important concern.

From the perspective of many temporary workers, however, exactly the same subjects can have a very different meaning. For while a number of these workers aspire to someday be hired permanently, the fact that they are as of yet not has a significant effect. "Why should I pretend to have the privileges of a permanent worker when I don't?", as one temporary worker phrased it.

This temporary employment status touches upon long-term perspectives as well as upon every-day, immediate interests. For one, many temporary workers also share an interest in such things as retirement age at 60 and, if they are in the industry long

enough, have just as much right to it as permanent workers. But given their more precarious position, making it uncertain they will actually remain in the industry until retirement age, the attachment thereto is often less deep as well as less emotional. Furthermore, given that they are, in contrast to their permanent colleagues, paid by the hour and then let go in the winter, many have very little interest in limiting overtime and Saturday work. While of course temporary workers would also cherish more free time with their families, overtime and Saturday work represent a welcome source of extra pay that can later represent a much-needed reserve for the annual months of unemployment. And in the case of bad weather, these workers are often out of a job in the icy winter months anyway, thus making criteria to shut down snowed in construction sites far less relevant. If they by chance do work during the winter, some prefer to work during bad weather anyway as they may otherwise not get paid their hourly wage. This will to work during (often dangerous) bad-weather situations can conversely invoke the rage of their permanent colleagues, as it puts pressure on them to work as well.

Finally, the occurrences unfolding in construction are perhaps most ambiguously experienced by subcontractor-employees due to their often blurred employment conditions. Sometimes paid monthly, sometimes by the hour, sometimes even according to the amount of iron-reinforcements they install or bricks they lay, these workers' interests often vary and can be rather short-term-oriented. This latter point is not least due to the fact that labor fluctuation in the realm of subcontracting is particularly high and workers are aware that they may not be at the same company, or even in construction at all for that matter, in a few months' time.

Many subcontracting workers with their precarious employment backgrounds are simply happy to have a job at all and, like temporary workers, are dependent on accumulating as many hours as possible as a buffer against the uncertain future. If they are further paid a bonus according to their speed, which can have significant meaning considering they are otherwise often paid the bare minimum, this can be a further factor shaping subcontracting workers' particular interests. As a result, the immediate interests and worries of these workers can in some cases bypass those of permanent employees and in other cases even contradict them in a similar way as done by temporary workers. As one permanent worker described his subcontracting colleagues:

Some of them are absolutely crazy. I am serious. They are insane. Some of those subcontracting workers would work if it were snowing, the scaffolding was iced and bricks were raining from the sky. And obviously that puts pressure on us to work in such conditions too. Great.

Hardly surprising, these different realities, perceptions and interests arising therefrom are just as much articulated along material interests as they are along everyday social lines. Deeply interwoven with the previously debated heterogenization of labor along migration lines, the social dynamics between the various workers on construction sites are often channeled along both ethnic as well as labor profiles (Kelley 2012).

One of the lines this fragmentation can be articulated upon is through company uniforms. As Bruno, another veteran construction worker put it:

When I started working forty years ago, everybody worked in their own work clothes. We were all part of the same crew and you saw that. We all looked different and thus looked the same. Even when you did have a different company working on your site, we were all construction workers and you saw no difference. Today, every company has their own uniforms and you can see from a mile away if somebody works at this company or that. You can really *see* the mix of permanents, temporaries and subcontractors. You can *see* it!

Another level upon which this fragmentation is articulated is that of workers' rest containers. Representative of construction sites throughout the country, the social mapping of a semi-large construction site in Unia's Mittelland was on full display when studied in relation to the structure of the site's *Baracken*:

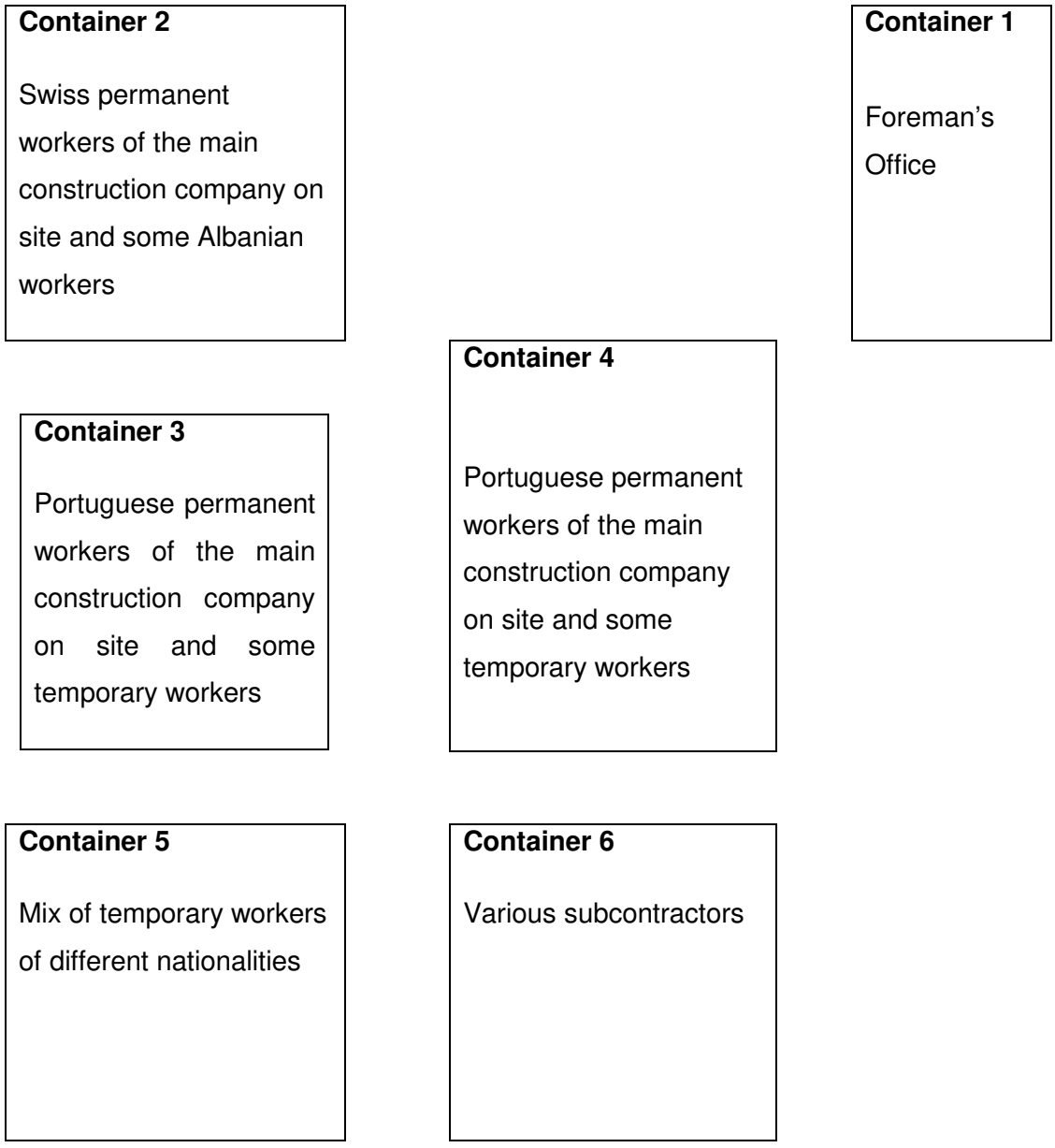


Figure 7: Bird's-eye view of the rest containers on a construction site
Source: own illustration based on ethnographic data

While the above differentiations are to a certain extent generalizing and it would be naïve to assume that the workforce of yesterday's construction site were some homogeneous mass, the bottom line is that today we find ourselves dealing with a complex mosaic of rotating and increasingly fragmented workforces (Kelley 2014a; 2014b; 2017). Besides the different, sometimes even contradictive material interests

at hand, the social dynamics of this fragmentation are accentuated even more by the fact that the temporary and subcontractor employees (and sometimes even some of the permanents) are routinely shifted from site to site and are thus far less embedded in the social collective of the "core workforce" of the respective construction site. Throwing in the increased ethnic heterogenization and current lacking of a "lingua franca" as previously described, the chaos is complete and the metaphorical smoke and smog of a packed and tense "Milano at 12h" are vividly clear (Kelley 2012; 2014a).

As can be imagined, while this phenomena may to a certain extent serve to enhance a company's short-term interests in the fierce price-and-time-competition of today's construction industry, the chaos arising therefrom can often present a severe headache for the workers actually on the site. This is particularly the case for the foremen and qualified core-workers taking on a more coordinative role in the construction process. It can furthermore, under circumstances, lead to certain animosities between the numerous groups involved, which is also not in the direct interest of those directly coordinating and working on-site.

Far from some abstract analysis locked away in the ivory towers of social sciences, the workers themselves are in fact very aware of the developments discussed above. This was vividly on display at a small national meeting of worker union activists in Olten. Commencing a discussion on the changes occurring in the construction industry, the head of Unia's construction sector asked the activists present: "A lot of you have worked construction for years. Some for ten years, some for twenty and you Alex, even for more than forty years. What has changed since you all began working in the industry?"

This question immediately unleashed a remarkably intense and impassioned discussion. A first worker raised his hand: "Our crews have been cut in half. You have to do more work with less workers." A second picked up the ball: "Yeah, the time pressure that exists today is like somebody punching you in the stomach every day. The bosses always tell us how workplace safety has increased and that's true. But today instead of falling off of scaffolding, you just have a burnout instead." Concurring with this analysis, a third added that: "There are more machines,

computers and all that – but they don't unburden us like they should, they just give the bosses a way to speed things up even more."

Writing down the workers' inputs onto small cards and hanging them up on a pin wall, the construction head continued the discussion: "OK, what else?" Four hands immediately shot up. "The construction site as a unit is decaying, it's falling apart. You used to have one firm on a construction site. One company did everything and they were proud of it. Even laying iron-reinforcements. Today you have more and more temporary workers and more and more subcontractors." Continuing, yet another asserted that: "Yeah, and that not only means more wage-dumping, but also that our teams are falling apart. The bosses switch everybody around, there are just more and more temporary workers and more and more subcontractors. Nobody knows each other anymore." Another: "When I started working, workers were seen as workers, as people. Today you are just a number. There is no more respect. And they fire people a lot quicker today." "Yeah, back in the day the boss was a real boss and would come to the depot every morning. You knew who you worked for. Today everybody has a different boss and they change every three years. They are managers, not *Patrons* anymore." The discussion continued for at least an hour in a similar way and worker after worker offered his own personal experiences and thoughts. Few discussions were as intense and impassioned as this one.

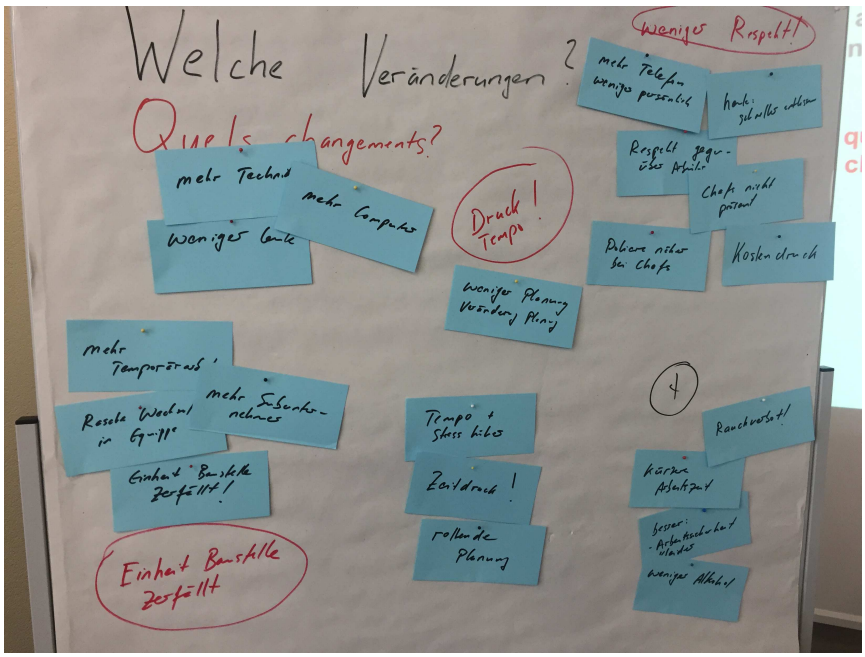


Figure 8: Pin wall of activists' discussions on the changes occurring in construction
Source: own picture

For a union seeking to mold these chaotic groups of individuals into a collective and action-oriented whole, the challenges arising from the developments above have been drastic and often brutal.

On a very banal, yet decisive level, the process of precarization unfolding in construction has not only had a severe effect on the individual workers themselves, but as we have seen above has created new groups of workers with slightly different, sometimes even contradicting material interests arising from their form of employment. As a result, the union can find it difficult to juggle the various interests at hand and find an overarching demand or claim that will have a broad mobilizing effect on the fragmented mass of workers involved. For example, the demand to negotiate a better solution for the problem of bad weather or a demand for capping overtime is received very differently by permanent, temporary and subcontracting workers.

On a more complex social level, the union is no longer attempting to mobilize more established, coherent and consistent social groups, but fragmented, atomized ones embedded in shifting collective puzzles and deeply splintered along various lines. Besides the various and often contradicting social and interest realities of these groups, this precariousness has in some cases also led to a “creeping de-solidarization“ (Dörre et al. 2011). This sees each group place the blame for the developments in construction not at the doors of capital, but at least implicitly at those of their permanent, temporary or subcontracting peers.

As a result of this multifaceted process, it can be far more difficult to mold collective identities and spark collective dynamics than in a situation where workers have known, worked with and trusted each other for years. Already existing social networks, which social movements throughout history have tapped into and built their success upon (Tarrow 2011), are often missing or are contorted. Throwing in the linguistic difficulties noted previously, the union’s activities have basically developed into, as one union staffer phrased it, “organizing in chaos”. This may not affect the union’s efforts at recruiting new members on an individual basis, as many are more than happy to sign up for membership that includes legal insurance, but it most definitely complicates its ambitions aimed at turning that passive membership into an active one taking part in concerted action.

Stephan, a union organizer particularly tasked with building activist groups and organizing collective actions, describes the union's predicament as follows:

> You are not speaking to one workforce. It's like you are trying to organize five different professions at the same time. They all have different realities, different needs, different desires, different questions. Even though they all use the same hammer, work at the same place, breath in the same dust. You have to change your language, structure your message differently according to whatever subgroup of workers you are talking to. You have to find out who is the important individual in each and every subgroup. And then you have to convince all of them that they should stand up for each other, fight together for their rights even though they all have different rights. It's complicated.

So, while the logics of trade unionism stemming from the structures of capitalism are generally speaking still valid as described by Marx, namely that employers are still dependent on the labor power of their workers, tapping into those logics has indeed become more difficult from the structural changes unfolding in this particular sphere of capitalism.

We have spent the last two chapters, part II of this thesis, concentrated on unravelling the various, yet interlinked challenges for the union arising from changing political-economic processes and structures. As a result, it has become clear that the union is not only fighting against more universal collective action problems debated by scholars from various traditions, but also against systematic employer offensives. Yet not only have industrial relations become more tense, but very particular structural challenges arising from the very "recommodification of labor" (Standing 2007) the union is attempting to curb have begun to present challenges of their own. This is the dual crisis in which organized labor finds itself today: the very same process threatening the material interests of labor as a whole is precisely the same one hampering its efforts to collectively defend itself against such threats (Kelley 2012).

As a result of these political as well as structural challenges, it has become clear to union leaders that rebuilding a union "for rough times" (Rieger 2014: 22), a "unionism in times of crisis" (Oesch 2011: 94), must not only include having the "guts" and conflict capacity to enter back into a more confrontational model of social partnership,

as we saw in the last chapter, but must also entail the development of new organizing models capable of coping with the structural challenges arising from such rough times. For while unique strategic opportunities such as those provided by the vote on the bilateral agreements may provide the union with a certain amount of societal power, which in turn may strengthen its institutional power, as the Jena scholars pointed out in our theory chapter and as confirmed in our historical overview, this cannot be a substitute for a union's main bedrock of associational power. In this sense, we will now shift our vantage point to focus on some of the strategies developed and employed by union organizers and activists in their quest to strengthen the associational power of organized labor.

Part III

Organizing in Chaos: Developing New Models for Collective Action

5. Relearning to Walk: New Strategies for Mobilizing

The union's "protest day" was in full swing and the next element thereof was about to unfold. After weeks of planning, the entire set-up took a mere fifteen minutes time. Seconds after the final "go" crackled through the walkie-talkie, a number of trucks burst into Zurich's main train station. Far from any chaotic mess, however, the events that would unfold in the next quarter of an hour were characterized by military-like precision. Recognizing their cue, dozens of union activists emerged from the crowds in the train station and swarmed around the trucks. They then proceeded to help unload the countless tables and benches stacked in the open cargo area of the vehicles. Passers-by gawked at the activists, who had now donned orange reflective vests and were setting up the tables and benches throughout the Western wing of the station. Anticipating this curiosity, a group of women, some union staff and others the wives of construction workers, were handing out what they referred to as "Streikschokolade" to the hundreds of curious commuters: small bars of chocolate with red wrappers adorned with the union's campaign logo and the words: "Who builds our houses and streets? We construction workers! Now we are fighting for more protection and our rights! Thank you for your support."

Timed to coincide with the exact moment the activists had not only finished setting up around one hundred tables and benches, but also a make-shift food-serving-station, about one thousand construction workers then streamed into the spacious hallway of the station. A loud concert of cheers, whistles, shouts and laughter invaded the previously comparatively quiet station. Directed by organizers and activists to first grab their waiting meal of mashed potatoes and chicken from the serving station and then take a seat at one of the tables, the "lunch-occupation" of Zurich's main train station had begun.

In an endless stream, more and more construction workers continued to pour into the scene, either being dropped off by union busses that had collected them from the hundreds of construction sites throughout the city or having arrived by train from other parts of Switzerland. The number peaked at two thousand at around half past noon. Following some tense episodes in the morning, where employers on numerous construction sites had warned their workers not to take part in the union's "protest

day", the workers present were now clearly enjoying this rather spectacular event. "I cannot believe we are doing this! My wife will never believe this when I tell her!" shouted one worker to his colleague with an endless grin and mischievous twinkle in his eyes. Others were snapping away countless selfie pictures with friends and co-workers. At the same time, union leaders were giving interviews to journalists and others were dealing with station security personnel and the police, some of whom were only partially amused by this massive intrusion.

Soon after the workers had finished their lunch, union leaders announced via megaphone that they would now commence to march to the construction employers association's headquarters, which was located about a kilometer away. Gradually, yet surprisingly efficiently, the roughly two thousand construction workers present fell-in behind a large, homemade banner saying "We build Switzerland" and proceeded to walk out of the station and into the city's Bahnhofstrasse. While it took some of the same route the demonstration in June had taken, today's march was different. Besides the colorful train station occupation, the day of the week was just as decisive. In contrast to the Saturday of June's demonstration, today was a Tuesday – an otherwise normal working-day.

What would later emerge as a decisive turning point in the 2015 campaign to renew the collective labor agreement (CLA) and defend early retirement, this so-called "Protest Day", one of three in November 2015, made headline news across the country. On Monday, the day before, over three thousand workers in the country's Italian-speaking canton had laid down their tools and marched to the local employers office in protest. On the Tuesday described above, three thousand workers had done the same in the German-speaking part of Switzerland, with two thirds thereof travelling to Zurich, where the construction employers association's national office is located. Then on Wednesday, four thousand workers took part in demonstrations throughout the French-speaking part of the country. When asked by the media about the CLA's industrial peace clause and if these actions had not violated it, union speakers emphasized that this was not a strike, but a "protest day" (Kelley 2017).

In this third section of the thesis, our focus is shifted from one that has so far explored the changing construction industry and the challenges these transformations have produced to one zooming in on how the union itself is changing in order to actively cope with those challenges on the level of associational power

and collective action. For while the blend of labor's structural and institutional power, seeing the CLA act as a stabilizing instrument for employers, is indeed exploited by the union, this only sets the starting point at having a CLA, yet by no means shaping what that CLA actually entails. In other words, while the employers' reliance on some kind of institution to solve their own collective action problems means that the necessity of certain rules of the game may (currently) remain undisputed, what those rules actually look like is a trophy still up for grabs and embedded in capital-labor power relations. In a similar logic, while the union has to a certain extent mastered strategies of publically "shaming and blaming" employers, thus producing a certain amount of societal power that is undoubtedly useful, it will only take organized labor so far considering that such public pressure first of all is often connected to collective action anyway and furthermore only rarely has a direct effect on the process of capital accumulation – especially in an industry such as construction.

Thus, despite the growing barriers thereto, the flexing of its associational power through collective actions by the workers themselves has shown itself to remain organized labor's key instrument for not only winning new concessions, but also defending old ones, especially in times of a more neoliberally dominated political economy. For not only can broad and public collective action increase pressure on employers, in its most potent form – that of the work stoppage – it directly interrupts the process of production and thereby infringes on capital accumulation.

As Tarrow points out: "Because disruption spreads uncertainty and gives weak actors leverage against powerful opponents, it is the strongest weapon of social movements." (Tarrow 2011: 103). And indeed, since its return to a more contentious style of industrial relations, organized labor in Swiss construction has developed a vast *repertoire of contention* (Tilly and Tarrow 2007) with a variety of collective action forms and protest routines stretched out along a continuum of escalation, depending on the situation and level of confrontation needed. In more relaxed times or at the beginnings of campaigns these can range from assemblies after work to "protest barbeques" during workers' lunch breaks on the construction sites. In more confrontational periods, these can range from two-hour protest breaks during working hours to full-day work stoppages and strikes.

That being said, while collective protest actions such as those described above indeed play a paramount role in shifting power relations in labor's favor and

strengthening the movement itself, they are far from given or automatic, even when recognized grievances exist (Thompson 1971; Kelly 1998; Tilly and Tarrow 2007; Tarrow 2011). Indeed, the eventful scenes unfolding in Zurich's main station were the product of intense, tiring and nerve-wrecking preparation: during long nights of planning at the union offices, yet especially while overcoming collective action obstacles on the construction sites themselves. For as has become visible in the previous chapters, not only has organized labor been up against more aggressive employers, the very precarization the unions were fighting against had simultaneously produced labor structures which had, as an unintended consequence, made collective action significantly more difficult. In the words of one union veteran, the process was akin to "relearning to walk" – regaining the ability to carry out behavior that had once seemed natural to organized labor.

This chapter examines the ideally systematic, yet often slightly more chaotic and far from complete efforts of union organizers aimed at overcoming this dual crisis of labor. It looks at union organizers' strategies aimed at not only having a membership "willing to pay" dues, but one also "willing to act" (Arbeitskreis Strategic Unionism 2013: 354) in a more hostile environment. Focusing on one of Unia's local regions during the campaign of 2015, region Mittelland, we will travel through the process of a construction mobilization. Beginning by analyzing the structural changes made in the region's construction team, we will then move on to the innovative strategic model it has developed. Proceeding to see how the union's ideas can unfold in the field, concrete cases of organizing and mobilizing are then examined. Crossing the metaphorical barricades, we will also look at how some employers react and how their actions influence the process of collective action. Finally, if we, as well as the union, accept that despite the strengths of region Mittelland's approach, this model must continue to be refined, then this chapter will be concluded by discussing the areas in which the union is seeking to enhance the model, at the same time preparing us for the next chapter.

Organizing to Organize: Adapting Structures for Collective Action

Looking back at our definition of the organizing model of trade unionism discussed in the introduction, Unia in construction is seeking to develop *innovative and systematic methods and strategies to activate and empower workers in participating in broad, comprehensive campaigns using unconventional and often disruptive methods with*

the long-term goal of shifting power relations in worker favor (Bronfenbrenner et al. 1998, Voss and Sherman 2000, Dörre et al. 2009).

Yet even besides the specific challenges arising from the changing political economic environment in Swiss construction, it is a truism that:

> The conflict of interests that lies at the heart of the capitalist employment relationship does not necessarily give rise to conflict behavior. Since workers depend on employers to hire their capacity to work, then they too have an interest in the viability of their particular employing organization. More, the subordinate class often exists in a state of disorganization, lacking an agreed view of its interests and without the organizational resources with which to pursue them. (Kelly 1998: 25)

While Kelly goes on to state that "fluctuations and variations in 'individualism' and 'collectivism'" (Kelly 1998: 25) do occur, thus allowing collective action to unfold, his remarks remind us that the latter is indeed something that must be deliberately constructed and is by no means a product automatically or mechanically arising from labor-capital contradictions – no matter how severe those might be.

According to Pedrina and Hartmann (2007: 93), both longstanding veterans of the Swiss labor movement, some of the most important factors for successful mobilizations and strikes are:

- the objective reasons behind the cause and a recognized legitimacy thereof
- a correct analysis of power relations in the process of the conflict
- the unity of workers during the mobilization and the existence of active workers ready to take on responsibility
- the experience and the skills of union organizers and the support of union leaders
- good planning, logistical support and the right timing, i.e. the ability to tap into the rhythm and dynamics of the movement
- successful campaigning for broad public support

The above made points are undoubtedly important factors, which few union activists would refute. That being said, however, they in fact tell us little of the necessary structural-organizational conditions as well as the micro-mechanisms that are no less than vital when it comes to organizing collective action in the field. While this was hardly the goal of the authors above in their short review of industrial conflict in Switzerland, it nonetheless reflects the fact that for a long time, more systematic and

micro-oriented models for igniting and sustaining contentious collective action indeed remained rather rudimentary or were even completely neglected in the Swiss labor movement. Instead, things were largely done by *Bauchgefühl* (gut feeling), as a number of organizers have confessed.

This was, however, not necessarily due to lack of interest, skills or capability, but because the conditions in the field did not necessarily demand it. As one union veteran recounts:

> When I started as a union staff worker some 25 years ago, we were far, far from any professional outfit. We were passionate fighters, don't get me wrong. And you need that – it doesn't work without passion. But you know, we would just drive out there and scan the horizon for cranes. Then we would walk up to the workers, talk about this and the other aspect of what was going on in the negotiations and see where the conversation led. Having a list of the sites in our area was pretty much the pinnacle of our conceptual thinking. But that's also because it worked! When things got rough, on some of the sites you could just walk up and yell "Sciopero!" [strike in Italian], and a few minutes later the boys would be boarding a bus [to go to a demonstration]. Don't get me wrong, we worked long and hard too. I mean back then, campaign organizers still did legal cases [of members], administrative stuff, you name it. But when it came to movement work, I wouldn't say it was necessarily easy or anything, but in the end it somehow just worked out. That was when we first started to organize protest actions [again]. It's different today – that just doesn't work anymore. Today, it's like we are organizing in chaos.

What becomes clear in this strikingly honest retrospective view is that while the union's degree of methods and systematic courses of action was modest to say the least, the surrounding conditions did not necessarily demand an increased complexity: "[…] in the end it somehow just worked out." However, especially when paired together with the statements and experiences of other informants emphasized in previous chapters, today's challenges to collective action – stemming from both changes in the industry and a growingly aggressive stance of employers – seem to demand a different approach.

While the entire organization of Unia has been travelling through a process of professionalization and systematization, one of the most explicit examples thereof has unfolded in the construction team of local region Mittelland. Besides the region generally enjoying a rather avant-gardist reputation throughout the organization, the

bare necessity and urgency of developing adequate and innovative mobilizing models has been further encouraged by the dialectics of the local construction industry. On the one hand, representing a great opportunity, region Mittelland is an area with one of the highest levels of construction activity in the country. In other words, there is great potential to both recruit, activate and mobilize construction workers in this urban metropolis. On the other hand, as a direct result of this high amount of construction activity, the degree of precarization and fragmentation, both on the level of labor as well as languages, is substantial. This in turn has increased the demand for structural and strategic coping mechanisms in the form of a new and more efficient organizing and mobilizing approach.

Region Mittelland's answer to this puzzle has been a radical one. And while the region itself admits, even emphasizes, that the model is far from flawless and is constantly in adaptation and development, the results it has produced have been noticed throughout the organization – and also by the employers. As one employer viciously complained to me: "I work in different areas of the country. The second I step into Mittelland though, it's just a different story – you guys won't leave us alone!"

Starting from the question of organizational structure, region Mittelland has dramatically reshuffled the way the union staff themselves are organized. For a long time, and as continues to be the case in other regions, the profile of a union staff worker had been that of a classic "all-rounder". Seeing a total of around twelve fulltime staff active in construction, these women and men were not only responsible for recruiting, mobilizing and building activist groups in both the main construction trades as well as in interior construction (painters, electricians, etc.), they were further tasked with providing legal advice to members as well as preparing basic legal interventions when necessary. Some would furthermore even represent the union in the paritarian commissions of the various CLAs.

Thus, many of the staffs' days would have looked something like this: visiting workers of both the main construction trades and interior construction in the morning and during their lunch breaks, then returning to the office to process growing heaps of paperwork in the early afternoon and finally giving legal advice to members in the late afternoon, followed by in some cases both activist and/or paritarian meetings in the evening.

When it came to this *eierlegende Wollmilchsau* (translated directly into an egg-laying, wool-giving, milk-providing pig, emphasizing the difficulties of being a jack of all trades), as some critics in the union have tagged it, a number of problems were glaringly evident. First of all, there was the mundane fact that there are simply few people (if any at all) that are so diversely qualified so as to fulfill such a profile of simultaneously being a skilled paralegal, extroverted member-recruiter and persistent and intuitive organizer and campaigner, especially in today's construction labor world. While the system no doubt had its advantages, one very negative result was that the quality of work was often rather ambiguous – both in the area of movement-campaigning as well as that of individual servicing in the realm of legal work.

Secondly, union staff functioning along this all-rounder-model of course only had a fragment of time for each function and lacked both a task-oriented as well as a temporal focus. In the words of one veteran union officer who worked in both this and the newer model:

> If we are completely honest with ourselves, looking back we did *everything*. But we did everything half-way – if even that. Each task was burdened down by the other, you were constantly running from one thing to another, leading to a vicious circle in which we didn't really have time to do anything right. Not exactly ideal when you are trying to start a revolution. [laughs]

Furthermore, given that membership recruitment and legal tasks were more quickly quantifiable than worker mobilizations, the latter representing more of a long-term process with many uncertain and not always controllable factors, this de facto saw concentrated mobilization work take a back seat place. Not only that, precisely due to the increasing precarization of the construction industry, the time dedicated to legal advice and dealing with individual legal problems had skyrocketed as a result of the increased level of CLA-violations, thus dominating large parts of the staff's days. And last but not least, things were further complicated by the fact that the staff of the region were generally assigned to the various geographical sub-sections of the region instead of working as one comprehensive construction organizing team. As a result, not only were construction crews continuously meeting different staff organizers whenever they changed construction sites, thus hampering long-term relations between the union and the crews, but the region's personnel resources

were also rather inflexibly spread out instead of focused on the dynamics of the industry and the areas of the region where construction activity was currently highest.

Region Mittelland's answer to this organizational dilemma has been threefold. First of all, it has focused its resources by abolishing the sub-sectional deployments of the staff. As a result, besides being able to more flexibly focus on the areas of the region with high construction activity, staff organizers were now able to work in flying columns zigzagging across the entire region, from one "travelling factory" (Bosch and Zühlke-Robinet 2000: 14) to the next.

Second of all, staff organizers in the field were relieved of their tasks in the realm of both legal servicing as well as any paritarian work. These tasks were delegated to back-office staff within the union. So, if a member had legal questions, the construction field officers could direct them to a trained specialist in the union office and no longer conducted the legal work themselves. Not only could staff organizers in the field thus focus completely on *die Bewegung* (the movement), but the quality of legal work also increased.

Thirdly, field staff active in construction were divided into two different teams. One of these teams concentrated its efforts on the interior construction trades (painters, electricians, etc.) with a clear focus on individual member-recruitment. While the region continued to inform the members of these trades about changes in their respective CLAs and their rights, provide legal advice and generally lend support when needed, when it came to more intense mobilizations and in-depth campaigning, a clear decision was made to focus the region's resources on the main construction industry due to its strategic importance. As such, the second team, the construction campaign-team, was able to dedicate its resources solely to the activities of organizing, recruiting, building networks and mobilizing construction workers for collective action in the main construction industry.

Of course, in the sense of *organizational flexibility* (Arbeitskreis Strategic Unionism 2013), these new structural changes not only dramatically altered the functioning of how the union worked, but also entailed a shift and concentration of financial and personnel resources both from individual servicing to collective action as well as, at least in the realm of mobilizing and campaigning, from the interior construction trades to the main construction industry. As a result, the staff organizers in this new

construction campaign-team truly became movement-focused field organizers. Now made up of around eight full-time staff, with the exception of training, planning and preparing, this team was able to dedicate its full time and resources to organizing and mobilizing on the construction sites. This not only meant that these organizers were free from “the headaches and distractions of the bureaucratic stuff”, as one organizer involved put it, but also drastically increased the amount of time they were able to spend in face to face contact with workers – either on the construction sites or at “one-to-one”-meetings with key activists after work.

Moving on to how this construction campaign-team works, it is indeed this face-to-face communication with workers on both a collective and individual basis that today’s union leaders perceive as laying at the heart of successful union organizing. Despite the dramatic impact the internet and social media have had upon a number of social movements in different settings (Tarrow 2011: 137), the vital importance of personal contact cannot be overstated. This is, however, particularly important in labor organizing, given the fact that employees are being dared to directly challenge their employer and thus their source of financial income. In fact, the importance of personal contact is something also emphasized by the neo-institutionalist theoretician Elinor Ostrom in her thoughts on collective action, stating that “Face-to-face communication in a public good game – as well as in other types of social dilemmas – produces substantial increases in cooperation that are sustained across all periods […]“ (Ostrom 2000: 140).

So, while social media and the internet are indeed used to spread the union’s message on this or the other topic, in particular in the realm of public campaigning (societal power) and often using pictures and short films, the main platform of communication with workers is the construction team’s daily *Aussendienst* or field work. Usually divided up into rather steady two-people sub-teams, this field work mainly consists of visiting construction sites: smaller ones during working hours and the particularly large sites during lunch and coffee breaks. These visits can include collective talks in the form of small speeches and presentations, yet can also see organizers specifically talking to certain individuals.

The goals of these visits are generally speaking located on three levels. First of all, on a very broad level this “presence at the workplaces” is done to not only normalize the union’s role and presence in everyday work-life, but also to ensure the building of

deep-rooted, durable relationships with the workforces by building contacts and trust. Second of all, as there are no so-called *closed shops* or collective membership schemes in the Swiss system of industrial relations, each and every union member must be individually recruited. This can either mean the worker in question approaches the union him- or herself or that he or she is actively recruited by either worker activists or especially staff organizers, such as those in region Mittelland's construction team. Third of all, and perhaps the most emphasized goal of Mittelland's construction team, is that of turning dues-paying union members into active union members (Arbeitskreis Strategic Unionism 2013: 354) taking part in collective industrial action such as rallies, demonstrations, protest days and if need be strikes. This third point is perhaps the most challenging as well as complex task, as it not only involves convincing workers of the necessity, utility and rationality of often contentious actions, but also means dealing with sometimes significant employer repression – something which will be studied closer later on.

As can be imagined, due to the linguistic heterogeneity of the construction industry, it is only sensible for the union to recruit union organizers who not only have the wider social skills, political commitment and assertive character needed for the job, but also the relevant language skills. As such, during the 2015 campaign, the construction team in region Mittelland was made up of a team leader, who was Swiss, and then a number of Portuguese, Italian, Albanian and Serbian organizers. Coming from various professional backgrounds, from journalists to airport workers, most had been in Switzerland before joining the union's construction team. Besides the multi-tongued organizing team itself, all of the union's flyers, newspapers etc. are also translated into the seven so-called *Bausprachen* (construction languages): the Swiss national languages of German, French and Italian and then further Portuguese, Spanish, Albanian and Serbo-Croat.

While there is no shortage in obstacles and challenges facing the union in its efforts to organize and collectively activate workers, there is in fact one factor inherent to the building industry that is indeed helpful. Because of the mobile and developing character of these "travelling factories" (Bosch and Zühlke-Robinet 2000: 14), in contrast to actual factories with their stationary and walled-in work-spaces, it is easier for union organizers to gain access to the often open construction sites in order to talk with employees. For even though labor lawyers and some legal academics

generally argue that union organizers must be given access to all workspaces based on the Swiss constitution's *Koalitionsfreiheit* (freedom of association) (Niggli 2014), this interpretation is (unsurprisingly) not shared by many employers, who contrast it with their rights to private property. As such, gaining access to workplaces is often easier without physical boundaries and is further invigorated by the often unclear question of who actually has property rights on a building site (given that the construction firm itself is technically only a service provider).

That being said, this by no means should suggest that construction employers always accept union visits to their sites. Some employers not only argue viciously with visiting organizers, but will also occasionally take them to court charging them with trespassing. While the union has almost always won such legal cases, some employers nonetheless use it as a means to hamper the efforts of the union. Being that such cases are, legally speaking, directed at individual union staff and not at the union itself, if organizers do not have Swiss citizenship, this can under circumstances be very worrying for the individuals involved. Furthermore, an increasing number of employers have taken to fencing in their construction sites and hiring private security services to guard the sites, specifically instructing them not to allow union organizers on to the premises.

Especially in Mittelland, with its high construction activity and the union's concentrated and visible efforts to activate workers, tensions can be high: be that in the form of over-zealous private security guards overstepping their boundaries or project managers interfering in organizers' discussions with workers. As one of the campaign-team's organizers put it: "It's really a jungle out there". While such tense situations and the arguments resulting therefrom can be both individually and emotionally exhausting, they can also threaten the success of a mobilization. If an organizer gives in to an employer too quickly, this can be seen by the workers as a sign of weakness. However, if an organizer too ferociously defends his or her stance or is perceived as being irrationally stubborn, this can have an alienating effect on the workers.

In order to train their organizers' skills in this regard, region Mittelland has introduced a rather unconventional instrument: role plays. The point of such theatrical role plays is to reenact actual or hypothetical situations occurring during organizers' field visits with the goal of then collectively discussing the strengths and weaknesses of the

organizers practicing and to debate the best ways of dealing with complex situations. While for some organizers this rather unorthodox step required a phase of “getting used to”, it has meanwhile become an inherent part of the team’s training.

In the words of one of the team’s organizers:

> The first time I did it, it was rather weird, to be honest. I could not stop laughing. I mean here I was, pretending to be some hard-ass security guy intimidating my colleagues. Don’t get me wrong, that’s what happens out there. They try and stop us whenever they can. Sometimes they even have dogs with them. But it was just weird at first *playing* such otherwise tense situations with my team. But as soon as that first shock wears off, it’s a really great way to actively and concretely discuss problematic situations on the sites. But you have to ready to really expose yourself not only during the role play, but also afterwards in the discussion.

Of course, collective rhetoric and communication techniques towards workers can and are just as well practiced during such role plays. When embedded in reflective and critical discussions on actual experiences collected on the sites during mobilizations, these role plays provide, in the eyes of region Mittelland, an excellent platform to learn *das Handwerk*, the tools of the trade, and refine as well as transfer one’s practical skills collected and honed in real experiences, successes and failures in everyday organizing and mobilizing. Besides rhetoric, vocabulary and oral communications, physical gestures are also practiced and discussed.

While the radical restructuring of the region’s construction team, departing from the all-rounder-profile and creating flying columns allowing for a clearer focus on mobilizations, has produced visible progress when it comes to worker turnout at mobilizations, it is not completely uncontested. Especially by some union staff outside of region Mittelland, the changes made have been greeted with a certain amount of skepticism. This is not necessarily surprising. For not only have the changes altered the everyday-life and portfolio of the union’s staff, they have also changed union organizers’ very identity. By relieving field staff of their tasks in the realms of legal advice as well as introducing more specialized jobs focused on recruiting and mobilizing, some older staff workers, who have long been comfortable with such an all-rounder-position and often perceive the legal advisory aspects of their job as the more prestigious ones, can feel threatened.

Furthermore, despite the fact that this specialization and focus has relieved staff of certain tasks in order to concentrate on others, it is no secret that this intense campaign-oriented as well as confrontational model has led to longer hours as well as to more hectic and often confrontational situations on construction sites. Expectedly, such changes are also not exclusively greeted with enthusiasm by all. Such objections are, however, far from unique to Unia or Switzerland, but represent an inherent concomitant accompanying union transitions to more campaign-oriented organizations, something noted by almost all scholars of labor revitalization (Voss and Sherman 2000; Lopez 2004; Dörre et al. 2009). Commenting on staff resistance in American unions going through transition phases, Voss and Sherman note that "They [parts of union staff] also resist having to perform unfamiliar and daunting tasks, as organizing means working harder and being more confrontational than they are accustomed to […]." (2000: 321). Such skepticism of course generally reminds us of the challenges involved in introducing change in large, often bureaucratic organizations such as trade unions and reawakens the by now infamous warnings of the "iron laws of oligarchy" expressed by Michels (in Voss and Sherman 2000).

However, while this skepticism can make the introduction of new organizing models more difficult, it is not necessarily fatal if these changes are regarded and treated by the leadership as normal parts of a progressive, yet not necessarily linear and often dialectic transition process. As Lopez points out, "Social movement unionism is not simply a laundry list of tactics, it is a process of change within the labor movement itself, and to know whether it can succeed over the long run we need to understand what its dilemmas are and how it might be able to deal with them." (2004: 12).

Besides openly discussing the reasons and vital necessities behind such changes with both union staff and worker activists, it may also make sense to recognize that the skills of some existing union staff indeed lay more in the realms of legal advice and servicing and offer them the possibility of changing to such a position. This can, however, of course only be done to a certain extent given the limited amount of positions. When it comes to expanding its staff and filling vacancies, however, many revitalizing unions, Unia included, have found that it can be useful to especially recruit "outside" people with backgrounds in more contentious, grassroots social movements. Not only are these organizers unburdened with more "traditional" and conservative perceptions of how a union should work, but often bring with them both

know-how as well as a thirst for more innovative and contentious methods of organizing.

All this being said, despite the essential opportunities provided by the organizational changes noted above and the fact that they provide the necessary space to focus on organizing and mobilizing, they alone do not provide an answer to the challenges faced by the union in construction today. In a way representing the mere skeleton or outside construction of the union's efforts towards enhanced collective action, the construction team's new structures must equally be filled with new and innovative ideas, strategies and tactics aimed at understanding and invigorating the micro-mechanisms of collective action in fragmented and precarious settings. Let us proceed to these questions.

Framing Contention: Region Mittelland's Phase Model for Mobilizing

As noted in the beginning of this chapter, while collective action can sometimes spontaneously spring from workers' grievances, "theories of movement participation have long recognized that there is no one-to-one correspondence between grievances and action […]" (Lopez 2004: 40). And as labor anthropologist Kasmir reminds us in reference to both Thompson and Jones, it is central that we as anthropologists study the production of interest, identification, grievance and aspiration when it comes to collective action and understand that "[…] class identity is neither primordial nor automatic, but must be brought into being by social actors." (Kasmir 2005: 79).

Furthermore, as stated above, while rather spontaneous, "gut instinct"-organizing may have worked in the past, the structures of the Swiss construction industry today as well as the growingly aggressive stance of some employers call for more innovative and structured organizing approaches. Taking into account the fragmented realities and sometimes colliding interests of the different workers involved, this means that the union must not only actively frame individual workers' grievances as questions of labor-capital conflict, but also convincingly portray collective action as a plausible instrument when it comes to solving those grievances.

The model developed and used in region Mittelland during the campaign of 2015 represents just as much a radical departure from its previous mobilizing approaches as the region's organizational changes did from their previous structures. Especially

when contrasted with the functioning of other regions, X's approach is a particularly complex, systematic and goal-oriented one. That being said, it is at the same time not simply a complete replacement of old ideas, but more a negotiation between a more disciplined systematization of tools that have spontaneously worked in the past and new and innovative ideas aimed at overcoming today's collective action obstacles. In region Mittelland, this approach has become known as the *phase model*.

In the eyes of the organizers developing and using this model, while the different forms of collective action at different points in the campaign obviously call for different communicative frames and particular messages, the logic and micro-mechanisms behind the different forms of collective action are generally speaking the same. In this sense, leading organizers in region Mittelland have constructed a model that seeks to abstract the general process of collective action mobilization and can thus be applied to basically all of the protest routines the union employs. At the heart of this model is a systematic and often mathematically precise planning approach based on almost ethnographic social mappings on the one hand, blended together with a communicative framing approach transferring continuously escalating discourses of urgency. What I mean by that should soon become clear.

Let us begin with the first aspect, namely that of systematic planning based on social mappings. This aspect is perhaps best introduced using a quote of one of the leading organizers of the region:

> It's easy, it's just math. If I want *x* number of workers to take part in a rally or demonstration, then I know I have to visit each worker at least five times in order to secure a commitment. More when employer repression is tough. Subtracting a rough third of probable no-shows, that means I have to get at least *x plus x/3* to explicitly agree to participate. And if say seventy percent of the people we talk to will probably agree to participate, that in the end means I have to talk to a total of *(x plus x/3)/70*100* workers at least five times. So that means I have to draw up a mobilizing radius with at least that many workers in it and make a timeline for visiting the sites in that radius allowing me to see each worker at least five times before the rally or demo. It's simple.

This "simple" mathematical planning has become a particularly characteristic element of region Mittelland's model. Taking a step back, what this logically means, however,

is that the construction team must have a relatively exact idea of how many workers are on which sites at that particular point in time as well as in the immediate future. As such, in what almost resembles ethnographic methods, social mappings of each construction site located in region Mittelland's territory are drawn up. How many workers are on each site? How many are permanents, temporaries and subcontractors? How many thereof are union members? How many and who are active members? Furthermore and just as important, the main languages spoken on each particular site must be taken into consideration as well, so the union's team can send organizers with the necessary linguistic skills to the respective sites. In order to determine these factors, at the start of an important campaign the construction team may first carry out a "research round" during which organizers put their flyers and newspapers aside and simply try and construct a precise picture of the social composition of the sites.

Such mappings not only help the union plan its mobilization efforts, but also provide a rather precise and adaptable depiction of its relative strength on the sites. For as the campaign unfolds, these mappings can be dynamically enhanced to include a traffic-light-system of red, yellow or green referencing the general sentiment and morale on the respective site in regards to (potential) participation in collective action. As a result, not only do these essentially ethnographic mappings provide the numerical base for the "simple" mathematical planning noted above, the union is furthermore able to track its own progress when it comes to mobilizing for a rally, demonstration or strike. Of course, it goes without saying that this aspect of the phase model demands rather rigorous discipline when it comes to calculating as well as constantly updating the dynamic social mappings of the sites.

Yet if the above aspect demands a high level of discipline, then the second pillar of the model, that of communicative framing, demands an equally high amount of creativity as well as deep cognitive insight into the social and emotional dynamics unfolding on the sites. For while mathematical planning guarantees for the space within which communications and persuasion efforts can take place, it is meaningless without discursive content.

As the name suggests, the phase model abstracts the mobilization process by breaking it down into a number of phases representing the key moments of such a process as well as the chronological unfolding of union visits to the construction sites.

In other words, if the end goal is to encourage x number of workers from z number of sites to participate in a rally, protest action or strike, then the mobilization process aimed at fulfilling that goal is broken down into five different phases, each representing one or sometimes more visits to a construction site.

Following the guiding principle that the entire process must transfer a continuously escalating sense of urgency and escalation in order to both motivate as well as commit worker participation, the model generally adheres to the following sequence:

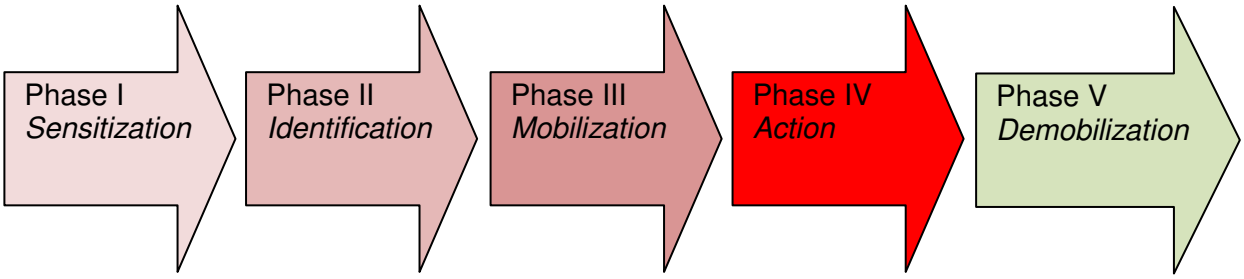


Figure 9: Region Mittelland's phase model
Source: own illustration

In the first phase, that of *sensitization*, organizers introduce the campaign topics at hand and encourage workers to openly think about them and if and why they are important. These topics are usually ones already decided upon beforehand as the result of broad interactive questionnaires, in which workers can tell the union what is the most important topic for them during the (upcoming) CLA-renegotiation. In the second phase, that of *identification*, workers are reminded of the essential relevance of their own collective agency when it comes to achieving or losing the campaign topic at hand. As such, this is both an identification with the campaign goal(s), but more importantly with their own ability to act and achieve them. In the third phase of *mobilization*, a concrete collective action is discussed with the workers and the necessary steps as well as possible consequences (such as employer repression) are consciously discussed. In the fourth phase, that of *action*, the collective action itself is carried out, be that a rally, demonstration, strike or in less confrontational times even just a union barbeque. In the last, phase, that of *demobilization*, the union team revisits the sites to discuss the hopefully fulfilled action with the workers, i.e. with the action's participants, as well as to inform them of potential progress in CLA-

negotiations as a result thereof and to counteract any potential employer repression. Furthermore, organizers place a strong focus on recruiting new union members in this phase.

While the phase model is an attempt to abstract the mobilization process so as to create a model applicable to most if not all mobilizations, the actual raw content filling these phases of course depends on the particular campaign at hand. In the sense that struggles between capital and labor do not only take place “in the streets, but in contests over meaning“ (Melucci and Rochon paraphrased in Tarrow 2011: 32), the region’s construction campaign-team – in collaboration with key worker activists – designs a set of precise messages it wishes to confer during each of its five or more visits. Developing one broad message per phase noted above, each message builds upon the preceding one and assumes a specific function towards achieving the final goal of collective action. In order to ensure that the messages transferred are both precise as well as consistent from site to site, the content thereof is precisely written down in a roughly page long “scripts” beforehand. The idea is that union organizers learn these by heart and then hold collective talks or “presentations” on the construction sites.

While the union does not explicitly style it as such, the specific mobilizing messages in region Mittelland’s phase model in effect represent a *cognitive framing* of labor-capital conflicts with the goal of producing a sense of injustice on the one hand and a recognition by workers of their own collective agency on the other. Stretching back to the cultural turn in social movement studies in the 1960s, the renowned Marxist historian E.P. Thompson was one of the first to deeply study what he termed “the moral economy” of social groups (1966; 1971). In doing so, he pointed out that people do not automatically or mechanically act against grievances, but only once they are “empowered by a *sense* of injustice“ (paraphrased in Tarrow 2011: 25, italics by CK). Based on this insight, numerous social movement scholars have continued to develop these thoughts when analyzing the *collective action frames* employed by social movement organizations.

According to Snow and Benford (in Tarrow 2011: 144ff.), collective action frames are interpretive schemas that simplify and condense “the world out there” and help to not only “redefine as unjust and immoral what was previously seen as unfortunate but perhaps tolerable“ (ibid), but also display the possibility of acting against those

injustices. Such a “cognitive liberation“ (McAdam 1988) allowing for collective agency is particularly feasible when employers violate (sometimes implicitly) established rules or customs (Burawoy 1979; Kelly 1998: 29), i.e. informal institutions. This in turn points to another important aspect: Besides the perception of injustices and grievances, this must furthermore be specifically attributed to a particular agent (in our case the construction employers association) instead of to “uncontrollable forces or events“ (Kelly 1998: 29). Besides presenting a target onto which contentious actions can be projected, the attribution of fault simultaneously helps to construct social identities of “us” and “them” (Fantasia 1988; Kelly 1998: 29f.; Tarrow 2011: 31). This in turn reminds us of Marx’s recognition of the need of the working class to develop from an objective class *in itself* to a subjective and aware class *for itself* (in Kasmir 2005). That being said, such frames are of course neither constructed nor applied in social vacuums. As such, they can and usually are contested by some of the other actors involved. In this sense, collective action frames have to be fit enough to assert themselves in “framing contests“ (Goffman in Tarrow 2011: 144) against the narratives of their opponents.

Looking at the case of Swiss construction, however, a clear challenge presents itself for organizers seeking to bring about collective action. As a result of the variety of employment forms and realities stemming from the precarization of labor, the union’s greater audience is one made up of workers with different employment realities, problems, hopes and fears. The union is thus challenged to construct relatively comprehensive collective action frames that are able to reach the various fragmented workforces to which it speaks. It must, in other words, mobilize and stimulate a certain consensus (Tarrow 2011: 11). At the same time, however, these frames must also be specific enough to effectively persuade workers into collective action.

During the 2015 campaign, organizers attempted to negotiate this dilemma by on the one hand broadly highlighting the union’s three demands of securing early retirement, fighting wage-dumping and introducing a more worker-friendly solution to the bad weather problematic. This provided a broad platform to reach all workers of the industry in one way or another. In doing so, organizers were at the same time able to emphasize the very fundamental importance of the CLA for all workers. Given that the CLA would expire at the end of the year if no agreement was reached, there was a certain objective urgency to this claim. Thus, using the general concept of the

CLA as a contentual as well as emotional bracket with which to not only clasp the various demands but also the different workers involved, the union was able to construct a rather comprehensive collective action frame.

That being said, putting the isolated realm of communicative discourses momentarily aside and taking into account the empirical social dynamics on the construction sites themselves, union organizers simultaneously realized that it was especially essential for them to reach the permanent workers of the core workforces operating on the sites. This was important for two reasons. On the one hand, despite a growing degree of precarization, these permanent workers still represent (in most cases) the majority of workers on the sites and also belong to the more influential companies within the construction employers association. On the other hand, precisely because of their often dominant position in the social hierarchy of construction, the actions (or lack thereof) of these workers exercise a strong amount of influence on those of the other workers. When preparing for the “protest day” described in the introduction to this chapter, one organizer noted that: “If the permanent workers walk, then so will the others.” So in other words, while the union’s collective action frames needed to reach all workers to a certain extent, they had to be conceptualized so as to especially galvanize the core workforce due to their particular social importance.

It is here that the union’s main demand, that of defending early retirement, played a vital role. While all three of the union’s demands took a prominent place in the collective action frames used during the first half year of the campaign (up to the mass demonstration in June), union organizers increasingly recognized that early retirement was the most important topic as well as the emotional priority for most of the workers involved. As a result, in the second half of the year, which involved the more tense mobilizations for the protest days during working hours in November, the question of early retirement took on a particularly dominant place. While early retirement is generally speaking positively connoted throughout the industry, it was and is particularly relevant for permanent workers. On an emotional level, due to their more stable position within construction, these workers identify more strongly with the industry as part of their social identity and are proud of such rather unique institutions as that of early retirement at sixty. On the material level, most permanent workers very calculatingly and rationally assume that they will one day immediately and individually profit from this institution. Given that the average age in construction is

rather high, this furthermore did not represent some far off utopia for most workers, but was something in arm's reach (which was of course also the reason the institution itself needed financial reinforcement).

In building a collective action frame around the issue of early retirement, union organizers tapped into shared understandings of a moral economy, one stipulating that it was "only right that we as construction workers get to retire early – nobody works harder than us!", a feeling often expressed by workers in the industry. Furthermore, by emphasizing the openness of the union for a refinancing plan and simultaneously disclosing the employers demand that the age of early retirement either go up or the actual pensions be reduced, the blame for the problem could clearly be placed at the doors of the employers. As noted above, by identifying and attributing the problem to this specific agent, this simultaneously helped to construct social identities based on one's status as a worker versus that of employer/management.

Besides highlighting the necessities and justifications for early retirement, organizers furthermore drew on narratives of the original struggle to introduce it in 2002. Besides orally retelling the story of that strike, the union produced large posters made up of a collage of pictures thereof, designed to act as a visual reinforcement of organizers' presentations. In doing so, the union not only mobilized collective memories of past struggles, "quasi-mythical incidents that have been told and retold" as the union's "living organizational heritage" (Lévesque and Murray 2010: 339), but also pointed to the legitimacy as well as obvious effectiveness of collective action. In other words: "We did it back then, so we can do it now.", as organizers repeatedly told workers on the sites. This was not least aided by the fact that at least some of the workers addressed had themselves gone on strike back in 2002. While this was a minority as most were retired or had otherwise left the industry by now, it nonetheless occasionally led to scenes in which union organizers would first retell the "grand narrative" of the 2002 strike and individual workers would then proudly recollect their own individual memories thereof, filling organizers' narratives both with emotional content as well as providing a stamp of approval by workers' well-known and trusted by their peers.

Figure 10: Poster depicting the original struggle for early retirement
Source: Unia

Put together, these factors enabled a relatively high degree of McAdam's "cognitive liberation" (1988). While the union's narrative was, of course, contested by employers, it was difficult for them to deconstruct it. The fact that the union had offered to negotiate a refinancing of the early retirement scheme and the employers had so far refused to negotiate was hard to twist – something the union was more than happy to accentuate. That the employers had so far not even come to the negotiating table was furthermore perceived as particularly outrageous by many of the workers, even by some of the otherwise more conservative Swiss ones with higher qualifications: "In Switzerland, you sit down and discuss things. That's the way it's done here!", as one such worker put it.

One thing that a number of companies did do, however, was to hang banners (provided by the construction employers association) on their construction sites attempting to portray the employers themselves as supporting early retirement: "Retirement at 60! We stand behind it!" On many sites, however, due to the fact that workers were already highly informed by the union's presentations, this strategy

vividly backfired and workers would gleefully poke fun at these banners, noting that although the employers might claim to stand behind retirement at 60, whether or not the height of the pension stayed the same remained unmentioned. On some sites, workers even glued makeshift signs onto the banners saying “Up to 1000 francs of pension theft”, the amount the union calculated would go missing if a refinance-plan was not negotiated.

Looking back at the campaign’s collective action frames, we can see that the union dealt with the fragmented workforces and their different cognitive realities by on the one hand developing a relatively comprehensive frame serving as a bracket for the different types of workers involved. On the other hand, by later on particularly focusing on the key players in the social hierarchy of the sites, organizers highlighted a key demand that was particularly important as well as emotionally charged from the perspective of the permanent employees of the core workforces. While this strategic and simultaneously pragmatic solution was not perfect and to a certain extent represented a kind of *bricolage*, it indeed produced the communicative framework that ultimately helped lead to the rather impressive mobilization results during the campaign – in turn producing the bargaining power necessary to actually secure early retirement. It also reminds us once again of the fact that: “[…] interests are not a given. Individuals define their interests in interactions with other actors and these interactions affect the understanding of those interests (Fung and Olin Wright, 2003; Mansbridge, 1992).“ (Lévesque and Murray 2010: 338).

While a number of the union’s other regions employed similar discourses, what distinguished region Mittelland’s approach was, besides the almost military-style planning and mathematical calculations, a strikingly clear and very strategic conceptualization of how, when and in which order to convey which exact messages. The goal thereof was to construct a communicative escalation that was not only comprehensive, but also took into account the empirical social dynamics and hierarchies of the site – thus producing a “cognitive liberation“ (McAdam 1988) and actively raising the probability of collective action.

Of course, the above described phase model and the collective action frames filling it are ideal types located on the level of strategy and planning. In this sense, the often uncertain empirical realities of everyday life on the construction sites can naturally turn even the most systematic and well-planned interventions into chaotic and

dynamic events – even when they do ultimately succeed. Looking at some empirical examples thereof is the focus of the next subchapter.

The Abstract Becomes Concrete: the Phase Model in Action

As noted above, while region Mittelland's approach to collective action in construction is indeed both a highly systematic as well as disciplined one, this clear concept interacts and sometimes collides with the more complex empirical realities of everyday-life on the construction sites. In order to unearth what that means, as well as to provide a more ethnographically rich picture of how the ideas above are actually realized, I will now depict three episodes of collective action in Swiss construction.

Introducing agency: mobilizing and motivating for an assembly after work

As one of the least confrontational forms of collective action, mobilizing workers for an assembly outside of working hours can nonetheless represent an important starting point for a string of collective actions and can under circumstances unleash a dynamic echoing throughout the entire campaign. While they may not directly interfere with the process of capital accumulation, after-work assemblies nonetheless introduce the very concept of collective agency by suggesting that workers may join together and become active in pursuit of their collective interests. On a more informal level, such rallies can also offer worker activists from various companies and building sites the possibility of becoming acquainted with each other, thus enabling them, in the words of one union organizer, "to see that there are other people just like them, that it's normal to be a union activist." Continuing, the same organizer stated that: "If people eat together, drink together and laugh together, it is also easier to later stand up and fight together."

Mobilizing for a rally of 300 workers on the evening of March 30th, 2015, the aim of the assembly was to kick off the 2015 campaign in the region with some of its more loyal and enthusiastic activists. As noted above, the process of motivating workers to participate in this event largely unfolded during the construction team's daily visits to the sites. On middle-sized and larger construction sites, this mainly took place in workers' rest containers during the coffee breaks at nine and the lunch breaks at twelve. On smaller sites, this was done during working hours.

When visiting one of these sites made up of around thirty people, union organizer Sara went from container to container to talk to the workers, now divided up into groups of around ten per container for their nine o'clock coffee break. In two previous visits, she had already informed the workers of the general topics at hand and as such, this visit was one introducing a first concrete action, that of the assembly. It was thus the *mobilization phase*. During her short five minute presentation to the workers, Sara's main goal was twofold. First of all, she had to consolidate the moral economy of fighting for the topic in question – the renewal of the CLA and defense of early retirement. While she had already discussed this on her last visit some two weeks ago, considering the importance thereof, continuously refreshing the morality, justification and necessity of the cause was vital. Second of all, she had to convince these individuals or individual groups of workers that it actually made a difference if they themselves took action, at this moment meaning participation in said assembly.

The script she had rehearsed and practiced was therefor designed to portray the event as not only just, but also necessary and rational. Thus, after reintroducing the cause in question, early retirement and the CLA, she shifted from the moral economy of the subject to the question of worker agency:

> […] Look – how did we get early retirement? How did we even get our CLA? Did the employers just give it to us? No, we had to fight for it. We had to work together. We had to move our asses. And we didn't just get up one day and say "let's do a strike". We had to prepare, we had to get our colleagues on board, we had to show the employers that we meant business. Big surprise: it's no different today! And now the bosses are threatening to attack early retirement and have so far refused to re-negotiate the CLA. So again, we have to work together, we have to move our asses! And as a first step, we are organizing a protest assembly after work on March 30th at five thirty. We want to protest against the disrespectful attitude of the employers, but also start preparing ourselves for the campaign to come. It's important that as many people as possible are there, because we need to start this campaign with a bang! And I want to see as many Strata [company pseudonym] people there as possible – make yourselves proud!

Focusing on one particular worker she knew well, Sara concluded her speech by personally calling upon this individual: "José, are you coming?" "I'm in!", the worker responded with a thinly veiled wink. Sara handed him a clipboard with an enrolment list. While this ritual of signing up was not formally binding, it nonetheless raised

participants' commitments. "Remember, we are ordering food and drinks for you, so don't forget the date!", Sara said, as she handed José a business-card-sized flyer with the date on it. Much to her delight, José's expected confirmation unleashed an equally positive dynamic amongst his colleagues. As he was a well-respected permanent worker, his positive response carried a certain amount of weight.

As will become visible throughout this chapter, this short episode actually points to an aspect of construction that is favorable to collective action. Despite the generally critical stance taken towards Olson's rather absolutist and universalist approach to collective action (1977) in this thesis, the inversion of his argument that collective action is generally unlikely unless in small groups is actually well on display here. For, while the CLA covers the wages and working conditions of tens of thousands of workers and the union's collective actions involve thousands of workers as well, the mobilization process itself often takes place within rather small social constellations: namely in the rest containers of a construction site. As such, positive group dynamics can more easily unfold than in large, more chaotic constellations. Furthermore, due to workforce fragmentation, workers generally tend to spend their breaks with their immediate co-workers, who usually share their employment status. As a result, union organizers can tailor their communication to fit their specific audience, emphasizing one aspect in a container of permanent employees and highlighting another in one of subcontractors.

Yet while the majority of José's group did sign up for the assembly, one older worker remained distant. "Look, I've taken part in a lot of your events, and there will always be more. I'll come when things get serious, but not before.", he replied. Besides this individual worker's generally hesitant stance, what particularly stands out is that this individual is not only suggesting that it simply did not seem worth it to him to come at this early stage when it was not yet "serious", but also that such assemblies were "*your* events", thus implicitly (even if not necessarily negatively) portraying the union as a third party instead of a direct association of workers themselves. While this in turn provoked Sara into asserting that "This is about *your* life, about *your* job – it is *your* assembly", the worker remained unimpressed and reiterated that "I'll be there when it gets serious, but not now." In order to not overemphasize the meaning of this single non-participant, which in turn might unsettle the other workers' commitments, Sara let the matter rest.

At the end of the five week mobilization process for the March 30th rally, the region's campaign-team had easily collected the amount of registrations necessary to guarantee a minimum participation of 300. While this was still a rather modest number of participants, it nonetheless fulfilled its function of a first step in the unpacking of the union's *repertoire of contention* (Tilly and Tarrow 2007) during this campaign. For even the workers who had chosen not to participate in the March 30th rally were still confronted with the union's message of cause ("And now the bosses are threatening to attack early retirement.") and agency ("We have to work together. We have to move our asses."). And while it was important that a certain "minimum mass" of 300 were ultimately present at the assembly, as the one more critical worker keenly observed, this was just the beginning of the campaign, not the "serious" part.

Crossing the threshold: organizing protest breaks during working hours

Entering the construction site in time for the workers' twelve o'clock lunch break, the first thing union organizer Maria did on this sunny September day was to shift her glance towards the open door of the workers' container. This was the day before a planned two hour protest break between nine and eleven on the following morning and tensions were high. What Maria was looking for was a poster she had put up a few days ago. While the poster highlighted the importance of workers standing together for their rights, she herself was less interested in the content thereof, but more in its condition. "Posters don't just transfer messages one way, they are a two-way street. You see, if the poster is still hanging, it's an indicator that the union is supported on that particular site. If it's not or if it's torn up or something, you know you still have work to do.", she explained. Indeed, on this site the poster was still standing.

Considering that this particular construction site was nearby the point of assembly for tomorrow's protest break, Maria wanted to convince the workers to come directly to the assembly point instead of picking them up with busses, as was the plan for the other construction sites not so nearby. Her reason was twofold: "It's not only because it saves us resources, but also because the more they do themselves instead of us doing it for them, the more it reinforces the workers' conviction of their own strength."

Maria had already visited the site a number of times and knew the workers well. She began today's visit by stopping by the container of the site foreman and again reminded him that tomorrow was the protest break between nine and eleven and that he should not order any concrete for the time. She also invited him to the protest: "It's your early retirement too, you know!" While many foremen supported the campaign, as it indeed directly concerned them, they were often under substantial and very individual pressure from their supervisors not to explicitly support militant actions by the union. Thomas, the foreman at the site, was a cooperative guy, but one that tended not to take risks. It thus came as no surprise to Maria when he replied: "I can't. I've got a dentist appointment tomorrow." "Really? Of all days!", Maria replied with a smile, well knowing that he was not least choosing to remain absent so he did not have to carry out company directives ordering him to instruct his workers not to take part in the protest. Not responding to Maria's friendly gibe, Thomas concluded the conversation by stating that "If the workers want to participate, then it's up to them."

When she got to the crew's container, the conversational culture was more direct. During previous visits, Maria had already explained the necessity as well as the logic of the protest break and it was not the first time these particular workers had participated in union actions. Since the workers thus knew what to expect, both in terms of the action itself as well as how to deal with their supervisors, this represented a certain advantage for Maria. As Ostrom points out, when players learn how to play "the game" of collective action and have done it before, this generally leads "to more cooperation, not less" (2000: 140). This site proved to be no exception and when Maria asked "So – are you boys still in for tomorrow?", there was a generally positive tendency.

"We said we would come and we stand by our word", one worker, the apparent leader of the group, proclaimed. Most of the others responded similarly. Not only that, when two of the eight workers in the container were slightly more hesitant, it was not only Maria that began to argue with them, but the other workers themselves. "No! We either all go or nobody at all. We are a group! And we said that we would go, so I say we go! Capiche?" "Yeah! Are you guys going to walk out on us or what?!", added another worker harshly. Finally, after Maria took the risky, yet apparently successful

step of asking them “Are you men or what?!”, the two hesitant ones agreed that they would come. “Good – then it’s *abgemacht* [settled].”, replied Maria.

What particularly stands out during this episode is that while collective action is made up of the participation of willing individuals, these individuals do not make their decisions in a social vacuum, but embedded within the social dynamics of their interpersonal networks. Indeed, according to Tarrow, such interpersonal networks are “the sites for the normative pressures and solidary incentives out of which movements emerge and are sustained.“ (2011: 124). Not only do they influence actors’ decisions, but can under circumstances exert a social control function (ibid). While in this case, it was a pro-union one, it can in other cases just as well be the other way around, especially if recognized group leaders are not union supporters, but are more critical.

In the scene above, we essentially witnessed how what Ostrom (2000) terms *willing cooperators* can exert pressure on the other game players so that they too will participate. This is, of course, not only due to a commitment towards the union, but also out of individual rational interest. For by assuring that others cooperate as well, willing cooperators make sure that the former do not free-ride on their costs. Sometimes, as was the case in the scene above, these willing cooperators will also be supported by *conditional cooperators*, who base their commitment on whether they think others will reciprocate (Ostrom 2000: 142). In contrast to more committed individuals, however, these conditional cooperators can get easily disappointed by others’ non-cooperation or free riding and may also withdraw their own participation if they assume others will not participate. It is in this sense vital that either union organizers, committed workers or at best both clearly reaffirm that once collective action is decided, then it “is *abgemacht* [settled]”, thus offering all participants a stronger feeling of security. Such assurances are generally important, as: “Those who believe others will cooperate in social dilemmas are more likely to cooperate themselves.“ (Ostrom 2000: 140). This is furthermore often reinforced by formal collective votes, as will be seen below.

All this being said, while Maria succeeded in confirming and cementing the workers’ commitment to participating in the protest action, her goal of persuading them to come to the assembly point directly, instead of being picked up, was less successful: “You guys are picking up everybody else, right?”, the group leader critically asked,

challenging Maria to a certain extent. “Then pick us up too!” While this was far from the answer Maria had hoped for, the workers’ hesitation towards going there directly should not be confused with laziness, but represents a protective mechanism from employer repression. For if the union team picks the workers up, so the logic, the “blame” is thus shifted towards the union as an organization and away from the individual workers themselves. As such, we can see this example as a case of collective action participants negotiating with collective action organizers on the terms of their participation.

“Alright, alright. We will send a bus here tomorrow at 8:55h precisely. Either I will be here or somebody else. Be cleaned up and ready to go then though, OK?” Maria said, giving as clear instructions as possible not least so as to again provide the participants with as much informational as well as emotional security as possible. “See you tomorrow!”

Upping the ante: protest days

Located on the far end of the union’s continuum of confrontational collective action, protest days such as the one described in the introduction to this chapter are contentious events organized on working days. Representing full work stoppages for at least an entire day, these events can on the one hand be highly confrontational and on the other almost always involve a high degree of what Tarrow calls “protest performance“ (2011: 99), i.e. colorful mass rallies and/or marches. For the organizers, yet especially for the workers involved, these days and even the time leading up to them can be full of tension and turbulence. Seeing that such events can not only have a significant effect on CLA-negotiations, but also fundamentally challenge management’s control of the labor process, employers have a high interest in thwarting the success of such a day – not only in terms of limiting the immediate economic impact thereof, but also in order to break a dynamic that might otherwise bring about more such events in the future if negotiations continue to falter.

From the union’s perspective, two factors are decisive when it comes to determining the success of such protest days: the amount of *construction sites not working* and the *active turnout of workers* at the protest rally or demonstration itself. It was in this sense that region Mittelland’s construction team threw its entire energy into working towards both goals in what resembled “a complex process of persuading and

activating“ (Klandermans 1984: 107). In the above described logic of the phase model, in the weeks leading up to the protest day, union organizers carried out a complex series of presentations emphasizing not only that the employers continued to threaten the workers' early retirement, but also that the next logical step after the shorter protest breaks in September and October was the planned protest day.

Three broad messages were thus central to this mobilization:

- The employers still want to raise the retirement age or cut our pensions. That is unjust and so we need to *stand together and act*.
- On November 11th, there will be a protest day in region Mittelland and in the entire German-speaking part of the country. *That means construction sites across the area will not be working.* The same thing will happen the day before in Ticino and the day after in the French-speaking part of the country.
- We need to show the employers and the public that the construction workers in this country mean business – that we are determined and unflinching. So we need everybody to come to *meeting point A at seven in the morning on that day*.

Accompanied by growing employer pressure on workers not to participate in the protest day, the weeks leading up to it were characterized by enormous efforts by both union organizers and worker activists and seemingly endless visits to the worksites. As these efforts generally followed the same logic as the mobilization for the shorter protest break described above, similar elements stood out here as well, yet simply more intensely, as the protest day represented a clear escalation from that of the protest break, one raising the stakes for all participants.

As Klandermans (1984) points out, individuals base their decisions on whether or not to participate in collective action on a sometimes blurry, yet in the end from their standpoint rational calculation of their own personal costs and benefits. In contrast to more narrow-minded rational choice theoreticians, however, Klandermans goes beyond an exclusively individually-oriented, material cost-benefit analysis. First of all, according to Klandermans, potential participants weigh out their expectations of the *total number* of other participants in the collective action in question, the value of *their own individual contribution* towards its success and the *general probability of success* when many individuals participate (1984: 585). Second of all, rational calculations in

the sense of costs and benefits are, according to Klandermans, complex and made up of different motives. The *collective motive* encompasses individuals' expectations of the success of the collective project when many participate. The *social motive* consists of the expected reactions of one's social environment, be that colleagues or friends and family. The *reward motive* is finally comprised of the direct consequences, both negative and positive, stemming from one's participation in the collective action at hand. It is in this sense that organizations seeking to mobilize groups of individuals into collective action must take a broad approach, appealing to collective as well as to social and reward motives (1984: 586f.).

During the mobilization process for the protest day in November, many of Klandermans' insights were vividly on display. One episode portrays these aspects particularly clearly. After having gathered around the relatively small group of workers renovating a school in the middle of the city, union organizers Paulo and Sara began their presentation. Detailing the planned procedure of the protest day lying ahead, their goal was to not only reaffirm the workers' (so far shaky) commitment to participation given two weeks beforehand, but also to provide as much information as possible so as to increase the workers' feelings of security. For as Klandermans (1984) emphasizes, people can only *expect* (often based on previous experiences), yet do not actually *know* what will happen and are equally aware of that.

Once again emphasizing that given the workers' already "promised" commitment (despite how shaky that might be), the fate of the action is thereby "settled", Paulo and Sara went about constructing the necessary parameters to bring about the highest possible actual worker turnout:

> If possible, please come to the meeting point at seven in the morning. That is the best option and also very important because lots of other workers will be there. If you cannot come, then in that case we will come and pick you up here on the construction site in the course of the morning. Alright?

By providing these two concrete scenarios, the organizers not only pointed out that they had an alternative plan B, but in doing so proactively closed potential information gaps that might have otherwise led to insecurity and thereby reduced the probability of participation.

While most of the workers on Paulo and Sara's site continued to remain generally positive towards the idea of the protest day, they nonetheless posed many questions,

quite visibly weighing out the pros and cons of their own participation: “How many other workers will be there?” asked one of the laborers. “And what happens if the bosses subtract the missing hours from our working time calendar?” continued the crane operator. And reflecting the particularities of Swiss construction: “What if my [subcontractor] boss assigns me to another construction site outside of the city?” as well as “I am a temporary worker employed by the hour – will I still get paid?”

Since most of the workers on this site were Portuguese, the questions were mostly directed at Paulo, whereas Sara summarized the important points for the smaller non-Portuguese-speaking part of the group: a Swiss permanent worker and two Albanian subcontractors. By this time well-versed in answering the often similar questions posed on the numerous construction sites they were mobilizing, Paulo and Sara did their best to give clear answers wherever possible as well as to logically explain various scenarios when straightforward answers were impossible.

“It’s not only a moral thing, when you give straight and honest answers, the workers take you more seriously. Even if it is not always what they want to hear”, Paulo pointed out later on. Being that the union reimburses its members for pay losses resulting from industrial action, regardless of whether employed by the hour or permanently (so-called *Streikgeld*, “strike money”), strictly material questions of pay loss could easily be answered and thus banished from an individual’s cost summary. More of a challenge was presented by questions as to how to deal with employer pressure, which will be studied closer in the next subchapter.

Given that only rarely will “each and every member of a collectivity” be won over by arguments of the collective good (Klandermans 1984: 587), it is not surprising that organizers also appeal to still-wavering participants on the level of social and reward motives: “What will your colleagues think if you keep working while they are out risking their necks for you?”, “There are going to be thousands of workers taking part in our action, do you really want to look back on that day remembering that you shied away?”, “Your colleagues, the crane operator and the foreman are taking part, so the boss will send you home anyway – so it’s your choice: do you want to stay at home for nothing or stand together with your friends and colleagues?”

In the end, in a conscious return to the main message at hand, Paulo and Sara repeated the two scenarios of either directly meeting up at seven or picking the

workers up from the site if employer pressure turned out to be too severe. The entire debate as well as the positive experiences this group of workers had already gained during the more mild rallies and two-hour protest breaks leading up to the protest day ultimately seemed to tilt the balance in the workers' calculations towards one of participation. "We're in – we will see you tomorrow at seven.", one of the men said, while the others nodded their heads in confirmation. "If we are going to take part, we might as well come to the meeting point directly.", he said, going even further than the two organizers had expected.

Similar scenes played out throughout the hundreds of building sites in Mittelland (as well as in other parts of the country) and as a whole, the protest day in mid-November was ultimately a success. Hardly any of the construction sites the organizers had mobilized in the region were working that day. This was, however, not only a result of the team's efforts, but also because the managements of some sites had specifically told their workers not to show up for work that day. This should hardly be confused with some show of solidarity or sympathy, but because many employers had made their own calculations: if the work day would be lost anyway, they might as well do their most to minimize the active turnout of workers taking part in the demonstration that day. This again hints towards the fact that while the economic effect of such a work-stoppage is one factor, it is just as much a struggle over hegemony.

As one organizer of region Mittelland's construction team pointed out:

> The bosses will do everything, capital E-V-E-R-Y-T-H-I-N-G, to stop our protest day from being a success. Preferably, they would like to continue work like any other day. That would be their plan A. If, however, they think that that is not possible, then they will decide to close the site themselves and convince workers to stay at home and enjoy the day. "Have a nice day with your families", "Go to the movies", whatever – "Just don't go to the union's demonstration." It's a symbolic fight over who is in control.

So, while the total turnout on the protest day was still more than respectable, with region Mittelland's team alone mobilizing up to around one thousand workers to actively take part in the protest activities of what would otherwise have been a working day, the efforts of some employers nonetheless had their effect as well. This was not least the case because this de-facto "day-off" by employers had fractured the

collective by making it more of an individual choice whether to participate or not and thus freeing Ostrom's (2000) conditional and uncertain cooperators from the influence of their more active colleagues. This had a particularly strong effect on temporary workers, as they were either deployed by their personnel agencies to other construction sites outside of the region's mobilization parameter or seemed less interested in risky industrial action due to their particular employment status. Thus, while the union's local region Mittelland had managed to reach a level where together with the workers it was able to effectively shut down the *process of production* on a protest day, the organizers equally realized that they would have to enhance their skills at convincing more undecided workers of the importance of *active turnout*.

That being said, this partial weakness by no means tarnished the mood of the day. As noted in the introduction, the eventful climax was the lunch occupation of Zurich's main train station and the demonstration that followed. Leading through the city and then up to the construction employers association's office building in a more quiet part of the town, the participants were in high spirits following the surprise occupation of the train station, something only a small circle of people had known about beforehand. This enthusiasm grew even stronger when the demonstration's organizers drove in a more than two meter high "60"-statue, symbolizing that the workers' early retirement age was here to stay. Worker activists and organizers then proceeded to cement it into a casing in front of the construction employers association's office and one person even ignited a red smoke grenade producing a red cloud arising from behind the giant statue. Speeches in the different *Bausprachen* (construction languages) were then held and workers were encouraged to sign a five meter long sign with the union's demands that had been set up in front of the building.

By unleashing this eventful stream of colors, actions and rhetoric, the union was not only able to generate creative and impressive pictures of the workers' struggle for the media and the wider public, thus linking its associational power with its societal power, but the events of the day represented the visual embodiment of lived solidarity for the individual participants involved. Workers that had previously been cautious if not even terrified of taking part in such contentious actions, including Paulo and Sara's group described in the scene above, could now be seen proudly

standing at the front of the crowd, their commitment more solid than ever. “This is one of the most exciting days of my life!”, one of them cried out to the affectionate amusement of some of the other participants.

When looking at such events, we are again reminded of some of Tarrow’s insight concerning *protest performances*:

> What is it about protest performance that makes it appealing to organizers of contentious politics? First, protest performances add amusement or excitement to public politics; second, they help solidarity to grow through the interaction of the “performers” in protest actions. But the most important reason they are appealing is that they disrupt the routines of life in ways that protesters hope will disarm, dismay, and disrupt opponents. Disruption is the common coin of contentious politics and is the source of the innovations that make social movements creative and sometimes dangerous. (2011: 99)

“When Repression Hits”: Dealing with Employer Pressure during Mobilizations

Despite the broader question of collective action by organized labor having received significant attention throughout the wider social sciences, in particular what collective action needs in order to occur, its opposite twin has, regretfully, received only marginal if any interest at all. Known as “union busting” in the Anglo-American world, with the exception of the newer labor revitalization studies, surprisingly little academic work has been conducted on the subject of how employers themselves react to and intervene in the activities and campaigns of organized labor (Kelly 1998: 58ff.). Yet as already briefly witnessed above, it goes without saying that employers generally have a strong interest in subduing collective actions carried out by workers in pursuit of their collective interests – both actions as well as interests often going against those of capital/management. And just as individual workers do not make their decisions in social vacuums isolated from their interpersonal networks as described above, neither do they make their cost-benefit-calculations separate from how they think their employers may react.

Thus, whether actually implemented or “only” explicitly or even implicitly threatened, in labor-capital conflicts the factor of employer intervention can significantly “impair the capacity of a group to organize and act collectively.“ (Kelly 1998: 58). In Swiss construction, this is no different. Not surprisingly, in region Mittelland, where the

union is particularly active, employer pressure can be an especially relevant variable in the dynamics of collective action. “Depending on the company and site management”, as one of the team’s organizers explained, “when repression hits, it can be rough.” And just as the union has its own *repertoire of contention* (Tilly and Tarrow 2007), so too do the employers. Taking on a number of forms, some employer interventions into union mobilizations are rather direct, formal and obvious, whereas others are somewhat more discrete and indirect.

One of the more indirect instruments in the employers’ repertoire, one that has become increasingly common, is a rather mundane, yet often remarkably effective one: ordering concrete on the day of a union action. When the union announces either a protest day or even a shorter protest break, often public knowledge at least a month in advance, many employers have taken to ordering concrete needed to fill in walls specifically for that date and time. Since for technical reasons concrete must be immediately processed, site supervisors then use this as an argument to try and convince workers that “they simply cannot walk out *now*”, as that would lead to severe damage and additional costs for the company. In doing so, not only do they raise the pressure on workers to stay, but they do so in a way not directly related to the union.

As I heard one site manager say to the workers on his site on the day of a protest action:

> This company looks out for you. And it’s not that we are forbidding you to go to the protest. That’s your free choice. But right now *we really have to work*, because otherwise this concrete will dry up. That would cost the company thousands of francs. You don’t want that, right?

While this is not, as is no instrument of repression, necessarily a knock-out argument guaranteed to sabotage collective action, it can nonetheless have quite an effect – especially on the many workers who are deeply loyal to their company and both consciously and unconsciously perceive the labor struggle more as one against an abstract construction employers association than against the management of their own particular company. As a result, such moves can cost both organizers and worker activists time and effort to point out to the workers that:

> Management knew this protest was planned, we told them so ourselves. So if they ordered concrete anyway, something they could have done yesterday or tomorrow, it

means that they either don't take *your right* to protest seriously or they are deliberately trying to stop you!

Another, slightly more direct form of employer intervention can occur when the union organizes some sort of event and employers seek to "occupy" the time space within which this is to unfold. Even if the union's event is outside of normal working hours, some companies will consciously organize an assembly or event of their own at the same time. Whether mandatory or voluntary for their employees, such simultaneous company events represent a means for employers to significantly reduce the union's turnout at best or at least to force workers to individually take a stand, thus openly "confessing" that their loyalty to the union is stronger than that to the company – a not necessarily easy task.

For example, when the union team organized a barbeque on a construction site at the beginning of the 2015 campaign, the site management itself also organized one at the same time, telling the workers: "It's completely up to you. You can either eat with *them* [the union] or with *all of us* [the company]." In doing so, not only did the site management attempt to drive a wedge between the workers and the union by subtly portraying the latter as an interfering third party, they also used this to make a list. "Since we need to know how many portions of food to order, please fill out this list saying that you are either going to the union event or staying here with us." In the industry, so-called blacklists of employees that are "too active" in the union are not unheard of, so the implicit message of this request, whether it was actually to be used as a blacklist or not, was clear.

In a similar sense, both on the day of the demonstration in June as well as on the protest days in November, some companies organized mandatory work-safety courses for their workers. In doing so, not only were workers taken off the sites, but they were forced to either specifically take the day off – thereby individually confronting the employers with the rather obvious fact that they wanted to take part in industrial action – or take part in the course, thus preventing them from showing up at the demonstration.

Subtle interventions can also take place on a more individual level. Some companies, after having identified the key worker activists on the sites, have taken to arranging individual performance reviews specifically with these employees during the union's activities. Especially in the case of some of the younger and more ambitious workers,

managers will often hint that they are considering a promotion, thus making the employee either take part in the performance review or insult the company by "ungratefully" turning down or rescheduling the review. Considering that key workplace leaders can play an important role in collective actions, as we have already seen and will see even clearer in the next chapter, removing them from the equation makes it significantly easier for management to break the dynamic of whatever collective action the union is planning.

Besides such rather indirect or subtle interventions, employer pressure can also, depending on the company, place and time, be far more explicit and direct. During the 2015 campaign, a number of companies regularly carried out detailed briefings with site managers and foremen, some using lengthy PowerPoint-presentations to instruct them how to best prevent collective action. According to a number of union-member foremen who took part in those briefings, suggested measures included more integrational ideas like explicitly guaranteeing workers that CLA-conditions would continue in the firm even if the CLA expired, but also more repressive ones such as subtracting the time workers even speak to union organizers from their time sheet and also systematically calling the police as soon as union organizers step foot on the site. While the union insists that Switzerland's constitution gives them the right to access all workplaces and indeed the police rarely actually intervene, the police's mere physical presence on the sites can serve to criminalize union activity and suggest some sort of wrongdoing. "Many workers think that if the police show up, then whatever the union is doing must be somehow illegal or wrong.", one organizer pointed out.

During such briefings of site foremen, many employers place a particularly strong emphasis on trying to integrate the foremen into their efforts. For given their formal authority as immediate supervisors as well as their often high prestige among their crews, whether a foreman speaks out for or against the union can be a highly influential factor in the success or failure of collective action. And given that foremen find themselves in a certain "sandwich position", simultaneously being supervisors with a certain amount of managerial responsibility, yet also employees with their own CLA and early retirement, which way they tilt is often a variable factor. But by negatively portraying the union as an organization exclusively for "*Hilfsarbeiter*" (unskilled laborers), "immigrants" and otherwise "lazy workers" on the one hand and

simultaneously emphasizing what Boltanski (1982) describes as the privileged *cadre identity* of the foremen on the other, some employers will seek to alienate the foremen both from the union as well as from the other workers.

While such efforts can take place in the company itself, they can also occur during a worker's training to become a foreman. As Remo, a union member and freshly graduated foreman, describes it:

> It's not only the bosses themselves, even the teachers at the training institute will put enormous pressure on you to leave the union. They even talk about it in class and make you raise your hand if you're a union member before starting a tirade about the union!

Generally speaking, the union has in recent years noticed a clear systematization and professionalization of employer interventions. As one organizer noted, "we are not the only ones learning and developing our strategies, so are the bosses." Starting with the mass distribution of flyers in German, French, Italian, Portuguese, Spanish, Albanian and Serbo-Croatian, a number of employers attempt to actively sway workers' opinions against the union. About a month before the union's large demonstration in June 2015, the construction employers association sent out an "urgent request" e-mail to all of its member-companies, instructing them to distribute an attached flyer to all of their employees, specifically together with the latter's monthly wage slips. The attached flyer explicitly displayed the union as both untrustworthy and unfair as well as portraying the employers in a strongly paternalistic light.

Similar measures by individual companies have included sending letters to all of their employees warning them that any and all protest actions during CLA-periods represent breaches of the agreement's industrial peace clause. While this is formally speaking a moot point as individual workers cannot be made legally responsible for breaches of the CLA's industrial peace article – any potential lawsuits in this regard would be directed towards the union as an organization – such notifications can nonetheless have an intimidating effect.

Going even a step further, almost exactly a month before the union's protest day in November, the construction employers association distributed internal guidelines to all of their member-companies titled "Directives for Conduct during Labor Conflicts" (Schweizerischer Baumeisterverband 2015). In this step-by-step manual for

“company management and cadre”, of which a copy was passed on to the union, the following advice is given (excerpts):

- *Keep detailed recordings of the disturbances, whenever possible through photograph or film […]*
- *Consider sanctions for employees who take part in the disturbances*
- *Consider legal steps together with the construction employers association*
- *Information for employees about potential consequences of participating in disturbances*
- *Fence-in the construction site, periodic checks of the fence*
- *Establish an access control (IDs, badge), organize relief, organization of reporting of all events to local branch [of the construction employers association]*
- *Keep driveways and streets open (if need be with the support of the police)*
- *Organize an emergency team and predefine mutual reachability*
- *Organize the responsibly for media contacts on company-level*

Furthermore, the construction employers association also produced a standardized reporting sheet for companies to hand in detailed reports of *Arbeitsstörungen* (work disturbances) on their construction sites and to declare whether they wish to pursue criminal charges against union organizers on the grounds of trespassing, etc. As is apparent, both workers and some people on management level of certain companies pass on such material to the union – regularly, yet often anonymously.

During the union’s actions themselves, particularly during protest events during working hours, site managers are often present on the site and will seek to actively stop workers from participating. These attempts can range from more confrontational threats, such as “If you go, don’t mind showing up for work tomorrow!”, to more shrewd ones, seeing site managers gather around the workers and then asking them one by one, often addressing them individually by name, if they truly wish to participate in such *Störaktionen* (disturbances).

Furthermore, on at least two different occasions, the construction employers association dressed up one of their office staff in construction worker clothes with the goal of infiltrating a protest break on one day and a union assembly in the evening on another. When a union organizer at the latter assembly suspected this, given that none of the other workers or organizers knew the “worker” present, he politely

introduced himself to the stranger and asked him interested questions about where he worked and who his teammates were. After the man was unable to answer any of these questions, the organizer made it clear that he knew “what was up” and politely asked him to leave as it was a private event. The somewhat startled man’s responded: “OK, I understand – should I pay for my drink?” A couple of weeks later, the very same man was present at a round of negotiations between the union and the employers – this time wearing a suit and tie and writing the minutes of the negotiations on behalf of the employers.

Of course, threats of and actually laying off workers as a sanction against their participation in union activism have also occurred, despite this being highly illegal due to the freedom of association and right to strike guaranteed by the constitution. While this is far from common or a general rule, not least because such would entail firing large portions of the workforce, some companies that are able to identify key worker activists do formally reprimand and sometimes even terminate their employment. After the protest day in November 2015, a number of worker activists were summoned for individual “questionings” and were formally cautioned by their employers, especially those who had been photographed by newspapers or filmed by television reporters.

And in October 2015, shortly before the protest day in November, one employer even (anonymously) wrote the union a letter protesting the latter’s actions and among other things informing the union that:

> […] Our employees will not take part in a strike, we have discussed this very clearly with our workforce! If due to your “pressure” some employees do want to take part, their salaries will be linearly shortened and they will be dismissed as soon as possible. We are able to get enough good construction guys [*Bauleute*] and laborers on the market! We receive inquiries from people interested every day! […]

As Kelly points out, even when only a small number of activists are actually laid off, the significance thereof “cannot be measured simply by the number of people involved […]“ (1998: 58). What he means by this is that employer pressure is something not only dynamic but also something unfolding on a discursive level as well. In other words, while the number of workers suffering formal consequences such as being fired for taking part in union activity may be relatively low compared to

the number actually participating, the threat arising therefrom is often more potent than the act itself and can spread like wildfire through the industry as a warning.

Hardly surprising, the particularities of the changing Swiss construction industry are also reflected in this sphere. While temporarily employed workers, many of whom hope to get a permanent employment at some point, are often more taken aback and can be strongly intimidated, many permanent employees, aware of their skills and individual market value, are often less impressed. “Fire me? Yeah, let’s see them do it. Really! Where else are they going to find a qualified bricklayer who knows the sites as well as I do.”, explained Cedric, a self-confident bricklayer who was, despite his young age, already in training to become a foreman.

Interestingly enough, many subcontracting employees are in fact also less intimidated – something that can, paradoxically, perhaps be explained not despite but precisely by their already precarious position in the industry. As Blerton, a middle-aged subcontracting employee and father of two, states in a rather “nothing to lose”-manner:

> Look, I’ve been through more than ten different companies in the last three years. So you know, the probability that my boss either files bankruptcy or just can’t pay me and lets me go is basically as good as given. So what stops me from standing up for my rights?! I’m a man and that’s what I’ll do.

It is important to state, however, that despite the fact that interventions by employers always have *some kind* of an impact on collective action, the severity thereof not only varies depending on workers’ individual employment position, but also depends strongly on the social dynamics of the site as well as the presence and role of active workplace leaders. Depending on these factors, employer pressure can also have a boomerang effect and motivate workers even more to participate in collective action, as embodied by the statement made by Cedric above. Generally speaking, the consequences of employer pressure are thus neither mechanical nor automatic and the union and its members have a certain amount of agency when it comes to preventing, minimalizing or even flipping around the impact of employer pressure on collective action.

One method used by union organizers is to preemptively introduce the topic of repression themselves. In this sense, before employer pressure is actually even exercised by the employers, union organizers will ask workers during their

construction site visits: “What do you think management will do if we organize an assembly?”, “How will they react?”, “Is that right?”, “What can we do to protect ourselves?”, etc.

By proactively addressing this sensitive topic, employer pressure can thus not only be demystified, but workers’ emotions of fear can sometimes be channeled into ones of “justified anger”. Besides asking the workers what they expect, sometimes organizers will also themselves *predict* what might happen, such as that site management will suggest a barbeque of their own in order to keep workers away from the union event or that they will demand one-to-one talks with worker activists. If this does not occur, then the topic is irrelevant. If it does, however, occur, not only is the surprise factor taken away and the episode becomes part of a mentally rehearsed playbook, the union’s position is also strengthened in the sense of: “This is exactly what they said the bosses would do!”

Following such *Impfungen (*immunizations, vaccinations) to employer pressure, as they are often called, organizers encourage workers to formally vote on whether or not they want to take part in the proposed collective action. As this is usually done before employer pressure has begun, workers are more free to express their actual views. The decisive point, however, is that since the various individuals collectively state their will to participate in the collective action at hand, each individual worker also receives a visible commitment by his colleagues that they will participate. So, when making and remaking their Klandermansian cost-benefit analyses later on, one factor flowing into individuals’ calculations is that they can at least to a certain extent expect their peers to participate as well – thus raising the rational probability of the action’s success and simultaneously lowering the potential individual costs thereof.

One union organizer, Alexandra, herself of an academic background, actually described the mechanism of such an approach as follows:

> For me, mobilizing means overcoming a prisoners dilemma. Mobilizing a number of people that don’t necessarily trust each other and don’t really know what the other will do. My job is to show one worker that the other will also participate – and vice-versa. At best, I get everybody on a site to come together, take a vote and say “I’m in.”. It’s like a kind of contract between them. That is the best way to create trust. My fear is not that nobody will show up to the action. My fear is that those who *do* show up see

who did *not*. That can be a dangerous dynamic for the future. So basically, it's all about building trust and everyday overcoming a new prisoners dilemma.

Besides such collective trust building exercises, the union has also found it useful to fall back on slightly more mundane and spontaneous techniques. It is here that the media can play a helpful role. While media reports primarily help to strengthen the union's societal power in the sense of producing discursive pressure on employers, they can simultaneously be used by the union to strengthen its own associational power. For although union flyers, posters and pamphlets are important and do have an effect, media articles can sometimes be even more important as they display a supposed "truth", that under circumstances can more "objectively" legitimize the union's message.

As one organizer recollects:

> At this one site, the employers had briefed everybody and we were having trouble convincing the workers that the employers actually wanted to raise the retirement age or cut the pensions. "Nah, they wouldn't do that", they said. We had distributed our flyers, pamphlets, even had charts to visualize how much money the workers would lose. But they did not believe us and said that the company had written them a letter saying that this was not true and that they should therefore not take part in the protest. Then on one day there was this really good newspaper article on the subject and so we made copies of it and handed them out to all the workers on that site. Suddenly, it was no longer the union simply saying that the employers wanted to cut the pensions, but the newspapers as well! The union's voice was suddenly considered far more legitimate and the workers all said "Tell us more.".

And last but not least, since the CLA is an industry-wide agreement and the union does not negotiate directly with the workers' individual companies, organizers can frame the struggle at hand not as one against the company, but against the more abstract construction employers association. Organizers often explicitly emphasize that "the fight is not against your company – you are Strata [company pseudonym] workers and can be proud of that. The quarrel is with the association." While employer pressure may continue and the individual companies are of course members of the construction employers association, such a communicative frame portraying the association as the direct opponent nonetheless relieves the workers, who often identify strongly with their companies, of feelings of guilt or of "biting the hand that feeds them", as one worker activist put it. Skilled organizers can even turn

the argument around and style it as a question of pride and reputation that "as many Strata workers as possible" take part. During the campaign, region Mittelland in fact organized specific assemblies exclusively for the workers of the larger companies operating in the region.

Yet despite having developed some answers such as those above, many organizers are nonetheless wary that the union will need to more aptly equip itself with increasingly complex techniques to deal with increasing employer pressure, especially for times when the latter gets even rougher and has a greater blanket coverage. As one former union leader explained:

> Yeah, we learned how to fight again. And we are slowly getting back on our feet when it comes to organizing larger scale collective struggles. But when it comes to repression, we still operate by a *Schönwetterlogik* ["fair weather logic"]. We just assume that everybody is all sweet and nice. So when things really get ugly, we are helpless. Besides getting a grip on the whole precarization problem, figuring out how to better deal with repression has to be one of our top priorities.

Learning Never Ends: Filling the Gaps

Despite the visible progress made by region Mittelland in their particularly systematic approach to mobilizations and collective action, it is evident that in the words of one veteran organizer:

> We still have a ways to go if we want to truly develop ourselves into a union that can empower large numbers of workers to participate in labor fights even when it gets really tough. We have to realize that we are not even close to having all of the answers, if that is even possible in the first place. Learning just never ends and that is something we not only need to accept, but also translate into reality.

Indeed, quite in the spirit of the Jena Power Resources Model (Arbeitskreis Strategic Unionism 2013), this self-critical recognition of the necessity of continuously developing the union's *learning capacity* is seen as a priority by region Mittelland. And it touches upon a number of topics in very different ways.

First of all, this means analyzing, contemplating and experimenting with new forms and expressions of collective action altogether. For despite the fact that the union's *repertoire of contention* (Tilly and Tarrow 2007) has proven to be useful in the past, both organizers and worker activists themselves have mentioned that they would welcome new ideas in order to "spice up old routines" and make the union's

collective actions “more attractive also for younger workers”, as one organizer put it. Besides this opportunity to make collective action “more attractive” on the sites, this would no doubt benefit the union’s societal power as well. For while the union’s demonstrations and protest actions are able to attract significant – and usually positive – media attention, there nonetheless increasingly seems to be a kind of “déja vu” reception by some media spectators considering that industrial action is comparatively common in construction.

This is, however, far more easily said than done. As Tarrow points out, protest routines tend to be “sticky” (2011: 117). Since repertoires of contention are phenomena embedded in cultural familiarity (ibid) and “It is easiest for people to employ a form of collective action that they know how to use“ (ibid: 111), significant change in protest forms is not only difficult, but historically speaking rather unlikely. Especially when structural changes in the political economy do not explicitly demand innovation, habit and comfortability may dominate over more radical change.

That being said, as long as protest forms seem to work – and right now that seems to be the case – radical change may also not be necessary. In fact, integrating new aspects into established protest routines may not only be more realistic, but also more useful given that a certain familiarity is preserved, yet more exciting elements simultaneously introduced. This was, for example, seen during the creative side-effects at the demonstration in June 2015 (chapter 3) and the surprising lunch occupation of Zurich’s main train station in November 2015 (this chapter). However, even this will sometimes have to be done against the resistance of actors who are still wary and uneasy with even the slightest of change. After the fireworks on stage and the abseiling of a team of climbers down a building at the June demonstration, carrying with them a huge union banner, one longtime organizer complained to me that “What was that?! This is a labor struggle and not some damn carnival!” While this complaint was drowned out by the many positive feedbacks, it nonetheless points to the anthropologically/sociologically-speaking unsurprising resistance to change in large, established (and sometimes bureaucratic) organizations.

However, even – or in fact especially – when new forms of contention are to be introduced, this does not minimize the challenges for collective action in general, especially when it comes to the growing fragmentation of the industry and employers’ increasingly systematic “union busting”-approaches. In other words, besides

pondering new forms of collective action, refining and developing mobilization techniques leading up to those actions remain pivotal.

As detailed above, in region Mittelland the union has indeed shed its “gut instinct”-organizing approach of the past and graduated to a more developed and complex model for “organizing in chaos”. Nonetheless, while the deep systematization, strict discipline and cognitive creativity of the so-called phase model have undoubtedly made positive contributions to *accommodating* the previously mentioned challenges, in particular labor fragmentation, the approach still lacks clearer and more comprehensive answers to truly *overcome* those problems. This was particularly visible during the above illustrated mobilizations for the protest day, where organizers rather flexibly navigated their discourses between the interests and cognitive perceptions of the various groups of workers involved, yet in the end pragmatically concentrated on the dominant social group of permanent workers. While this turned out to be a wise decision at the moment, a future model will probably have to unearth a more comprehensive and holistic approach to deal with the industry’s fragmentation.

While such a future model will no doubt take on a number of forms, in a precarious labor world with fluid boundaries and uncertain perspectives this will probably mean unearthing new channels of mobilization reaching beyond the actual construction sites themselves. One such element with which region Mittelland is already experimenting is one interweaving the threads of labor with those of migrant communities, in particular that of the Portuguese, who make up a large portion of construction’s workforce. Besides simply having Portuguese labor organizers who are able to communicate in the workers’ mother tongue, this also means actively and recognizably taking part in the Portuguese community. And not least because many Portuguese migrants in Switzerland have a clear and conscious plan to return to Portugal someday (Fibbi et al. 2010), there is an active, visible and deeply interconnected Portuguese community with community centers, clubs, choir groups, etc.

In these endeavors of “community organizing”, besides carrying out surveys about what is important for the Portuguese community in Switzerland, organizing discussions on social and political topics and carrying out folk events on Portuguese holidays, the union also taps into the existing networks in the community with the aim

of mobilizing the high number of construction workers in those networks for industrial action. This can be particularly rewarding given that the mobilization process can be conducted free of any employer intervention, but also because strong collective structures and a group identity are already existent – often in stark contrast to the growing fragmentation on the construction sites themselves. The results thereof are reflected in the fact that besides feeding in additional participants, June's construction demonstration was also led by a Portuguese drum band well-known and popular in the community, "sending chills of pride down my back" as one Portuguese worker activist put it. Similar efforts are also conducted in the Albanian community, which also has a high number of construction workers in it.

In the greater world of social movements, such a community-based organizing approach, either used as a main instrument or as an auxiliary to more classic workplace organizing, is far from novel. Whether the sports clubs of the labor movement of old or the role of churches in the African American civil rights movement, social movement scholars have long pointed out that organizations capable of "[appropriating] such institutions for their own purposes are more likely to succeed than are those that create new organizational niches (McAdam et al. 2001)." (Tarrow 2011: 31).

That being said, while particular migrant communities may continue to express (and actively construct) more identifiable and tangible community structures as a coping mechanism to life in a foreign country, structures into which organized labor can tap and build alliances, this is not necessarily the case for all. As Tarrow points out:

> […] twenty-first century social life, organized around the family, the TV screen, and the cellphone, does not offer as many opportunities for sustained interpersonal interaction as our ancestors found in the pub, the parish church, and the bowling league; […] the sheer density of formal associations in contemporary society offers numerous alternatives for individuals in search of organizations to join. (2011: 131)

This dilemma is particularly relevant when it comes to Swiss workers. For, while the Swiss may represent a statistical minority in the industry, they are often some of the key players on construction sites due to their skills, permanent employment and dominant position in the social hierarchy of the site. Thus, while tapping into migrant communities is no doubt an innovative approach that has already yielded interesting results, it can only be a partial supplement and by no means a replacement to more

direct workplace organizing. And it is in the latter sphere that the union will have to continue to develop, create and recreate its skills and forge ahead with new ideas to overcome the increasingly precarious and fragmented construction industry.

One of the most important if not absolutely paramount elements of such an odyssey is something already described in chapter 3, the union's central project of *Unia Forte*: a "strong Unia" based on actively empowering worker activists to not only participate in the union, but to truly carry it. In fact, many in the union believe that while systematic and creative approaches to mobilizations such as those described in this chapter are indeed crucial and indispensable, one of the most important keys to building a trade union that is able to survive the growing fragmentation of labor and increasing employer pressure in the long run lies in such an Unia Forte. In other words, while step-by-step mobilizing efforts by union staff and detailed communicative framing thereof no doubt have their effect and will always play a valuable role in the construction of collective action, an equally important pillar of labor revitalization may lie in the enhanced identification, recruitment, training and empowerment of key worker activists that are already embedded and influential in the complex social dynamics of Switzerland's construction sites. Creating a more participatory and grassroots-driven union is, however, just like the mobilization process itself, something not given or automatic and seldom spontaneous, but a social phenomenon that must actively be constructed by union organizers and already active workplace leaders. Let us take a look at this process in the next chapter.

6. “The Union – That’s Us!”: Empowering Workplace Leaders and Activists

On a rainy Saturday in October, the national leader of Unia’s construction sector and other union staff were talking to a group of around twenty construction workers in the union’s central headquarters in Bern. In contrast to the otherwise mass rallies and demonstrations, the setting here was clearly different. Located in a middle-sized room with a beamer projecting a multi-slide presentation onto the wall, the meeting was less characterized by the usual fiery speeches and shouting matches, but more by sober, no-nonsense analysis and planning. Besides stacks of paper and newspapers, half-eaten croissants and endless cups of meanwhile lukewarm coffee also decorated the u-shaped table.

Comprised of the “construction presidents” of Unia’s various regions, this regularly meeting body had temporarily changed its name from “construction presidents conference” to “campaign committee” for the duration of the 2015 campaign. This move underlined not only the high priority of the campaign, but also the importance of the regional construction presidents when it came to planning and discussing it. The defining characteristic of this group was that these construction presidents were not fulltime union staff, but were construction workers themselves, i.e. worker activists who dedicated their free time, this time a Saturday, to volunteer activism within the union. The title of “construction president” denoted the fact that they had been elected by their peer construction workers in their respective region to preside over the local activist committee and represent it at national meetings such as these.

The national leader of the union’s construction sector, himself a full-time trade unionist, informed the assembled construction presidents of the current state of affairs concerning the negotiations as well as the planning of the then upcoming protest days in November. He told them that the construction employers had still not begun to negotiate about the renewal of the collective labor agreement and also continued to signal that when it came to early retirement, they were still only willing to discuss cutting workers’ pensions and not a refinancing-plan to guarantee the status quo. As a result, the protest days across the country in November were now more important than ever.

Moving on, he then asked the construction presidents what their take of the situation was and especially how the already carried out protest breaks in their regions had gone in September and early October. Besides venting their anger at the employers' continued "Blockadehaltung" (blockade attitude), the activists present described in detail what was going on in their region. Among others, the president from region Mittelland gave a lengthy portrayal of both the protest breaks in his region as well as the individual company rallies the region had organized. He explained that: "Some of the guys [workers] were at first a bit scared of the upcoming protest day since they thought it meant breaking the industrial peace clause as the CLA is still running. But the smaller protest breaks in September really helped to take their fears away. It showed them their own power and was a necessary first step before the big day in November. Those went really well in our region." He was visibly proud and enjoying the fact that he was able to report on this progress made.

The national construction leader then gave his own analysis of the situation. "There is a chance that we will come to an agreement with the employers before the end of the year. But I have to be honest with you. It is a slim one. I would say twenty percent chance that we do, eighty percent that we don't." One construction president then raised his hand at this point: "If that's the case, and I generally agree with you, then we all know what that means. It means we have to start preparing for strikes in April. Big strikes, really big strikes. And we Vertrauensleute [confidants/activists] have to be a driving force in that." The room fell silent for a moment, everybody nodded in agreement.

Whether during debates in strategically-oriented bodies such as the above, discussions and votes in regional construction assemblies on a local level or in the sometimes heated exchanges during a mobilization on the worksites themselves, individual worker activists can and do play a decisive role in the union. As witnessed in the previous chapter, while in today's construction world fulltime union staff are largely responsible for organizing and mobilizing for collective action, in the end not only are the workers themselves the ones that actually have to take part in the action in question, but certain individuals within the workforce can and often do play a pivotal role in the mobilization process beforehand. Indeed, during tricky discussions on a construction site or in times of severe employer pressure, the presence of a

dedicated and well-respected worker activist can make all the difference in the success of whatever action is to be carried out.

Going far beyond single protest actions themselves, however, a strong and wide-reaching empowerment of grassroots activists is, next to a growing membership and mobilizing capacity, the main and most important goal by which Unia measures itself. Besides a political commitment by today's union leadership to democratize the labor movement by developing a stronger and more active membership base, this long-term project of *Unia Forte* ("strong Unia") is derived, as the name suggests, from the conviction that only a union truly rooted in the workforce can be a successful one.

Hardly confined to Unia, such a grassroots, "rank-and-file-intensive" (Bronfenbrenner and Juravich 1995) approach is in fact, next to an innovative, systematic and confrontational course of action, the core pillar of the *organizing model*. As Jane McAlevey, herself a former union organizer turned academic, puts it: "[The organizing approach] places the agency for success with a continually expanding base of ordinary people, a mass of people never previously involved, who don't consider themselves activists at all – that's the point of organizing. […] Ordinary people help make the power analysis, design the strategy, and achieve the outcome. They are essential and they know it." (2016: 10). In a slightly more dramatic as well as polemic tone, Ariovich describes the same general approach as follows: "The organizing local approach depends on a minority of [workplace] activists ready to stand up and challenge employers even when the majority of workers prefer to stay home." (2010: 2). And finally, as Lopez enthusiastically notes: "[…] social movement organizing allows the union to create a new vision of participatory, powerful unionism that is understood – by workers – to be different from the old-style [service-oriented] business unionism of [their own] experience and cultural memory." (2004: 18).

Yet despite this clear and passionate ambition, just like the mass mobilizations on the construction sites themselves, the realization of such a dream does not come automatically nor without a concentrated effort. On the contrary, particularly after decades of industrial peace and a more passive-representative style of trade unionism, such an approach requires a fundamental rethinking and "directional change for our culture and current practice", as former Unia president Vasco Pedrina put it (2009: 2). For during the years of welfare capitalism, when unions took on a more corporatistic role and largely confined their activities to negotiating *for workers*

and occasionally giving them individual legal advice, the role of the fulltime professional staff grew significantly – at the cost of worker involvement and activism. Albeit perhaps plausible given the political economic setting of the day, as soon as the era of welfare capitalism came to a crashing end and the neoliberal "recommodification of labor" (Standing 2007) began to unfold, the unions found themselves in a stark crisis as described in chapter three. And while the union has slowly been able to regain its mobilization ability as described in the previous chapter, it has done so with "a crucial limitation: the steps in this direction have mainly been realized by paid union staff." (Pedrina 2009).

Thus, after regaining a certain *conflict capacity* (Arbeitskreis Strategic Unionism 2013) and at least momentarily stabilizing its mobilization ability with new and innovative methods as described in the previous chapter, the "new horizon" (Pedrina 2009) for organized labor is one aiming to transform itself from an organization heavily dependent on fulltime staff to one driven by worker activists themselves – one resembling more of a social movement than the bureaucratic stereotype of a large NGO. As one union organizer poetically summarized it: "It means creating an organization that breaths when they [the members] breathe, that acts when they act, that grows and flourishes when they are dedicated and active. It means making it truly *their organization* in every sense of the term."

While this endeavor is central to the entire organization of Unia, it is particularly important to construction. For if the union wishes to maintain, let alone enhance its ability to mobilize and activate great masses of workers and thus continue to defend old and win new concessions, then building a more active and empowered base is pivotal. For precisely in more precarious and fragmented labor settings and especially during episodes of repression, the activities, efforts and commitments of key workplace leaders can be decisive.

This chapter takes a closer look at how this journey of travelling "back to a trade union of the future", as one organizer phrased it, can be realized in the changing construction industry. While some of this (re)construction process of a more participatory union unfolds on a national level, such as that described in the introductory scene above or during delegates assemblies, the great majority thereof as well as the often profound relationships between organizers and activists unfold at the union's frontline, i.e. in its local regions. As a result, we will not only study the

union's efforts as a whole, but also return to region Mittelland and explore their particular activities in this realm. Besides providing us with a rich ethnographic fountain, this perspective also allows us to see how the construction of a more participatory union can go hand in hand – and sometimes collide – with the systematic mobilization efforts of union organizers described in the last chapter.

We will begin by analyzing where the union actually stands today, coming to realize that while there is already a high amount of participation when it comes to elections, greater strategy and material questions of the industry's CLA, when it comes to the more operative sphere of actually organizing and mobilizing for collective action, active worker participation is often lacking. We will then continue by examining some of region Mittelland's more innovative ideas of how a stronger integration of worker activists in the operative sphere of collective action might actually be conducted as well as brought in to harmony with the systematic mobilizations described in the last chapter. After that, we will invite three worker activists themselves to have their say, taking a semi-biographical approach and simultaneously transporting the discussion from that of a more strategic perspective to one focused on the concrete experiences of worker activists themselves. Finally, in a similar fashion as to how we concluded our last chapter, we will finish by discussing still open questions and some of the existing challenges for the union.

Juggling Ambitions with Historical Baggage: Worker Participation Today

With around 40'000 members in the main construction industry alone, Unia's main power in the industry, its associational power, stems from these very members. There are few other economic sectors in Switzerland in which a union can boast an equally high level of organization. Besides paying dues and serving as a statistic, however, a respectable minority of these 40'000 members also actively take part in "union life" in one way or another at some point in their lives. This can take on different forms ranging from participating in collective actions, such as those depicted in the previous chapter, to assuming more formal, steady and individual roles in the structures of the organization itself.

Such participation in the structures of the union can include events such as a local region's annual general assembly, but also more regular and industry-focused activities such as being an active *Vertrauensmann* (directly translated to *confidant*, meaning worker activist) of the local region's "construction group". Representing the

elementary collective structure of organized construction workers at a regional level, these groups are often the easiest and most low-threshold way for a worker to enter into the structures of the union. Meeting between once a month and four times a year, among other things these groups discuss their region's position to political and industry issues, hold educational evenings on current events, organize social evenings and in some cases brainstorm ideas to realize and if need be adapt the national campaign in their particular region.

Furthermore, participation in these regional construction groups can and often does go hand in hand with taking part in the greater decision-making process within the national union itself. As a democratic organization in the legal form of a *Verein* (association, club), Unia has a strict constitution stipulating that not only must the general strategy of the union as well as that of its sub-units, such as the construction sector, be formally voted upon by union delegates, i.e. worker activists, but that all higher leadership-positions must also be elected by the same. In construction, what this means is that the regional construction groups delegate a number of their members to take part in national delegates assemblies, so-called *Berufskonferenzen* (vocational conferences), usually held between two and three times a year.

A number of topics are discussed at these national assemblies. For one, the union's national strategy and action plan for the upcoming time period is put forward by the national construction leadership and discussed, if necessary adjusted and then voted upon by the delegates present. Besides that, the national construction leadership, in particular its head, must itself be regularly voted in by the same delegates. In an equal sense, the CLA-negotiating team must also be elected at the start of each negotiation. And finally, the delegates also ratify newly negotiated CLAs if they are deemed good enough – and can reject them if not. These national assemblies or *Berufskonferenzen* usually involve around 120 delegates, yet during a campaign year they can be upgraded to a so-called *Landsgemeinde* including up to 400 delegates. On a more regular basis, usually every three months or even monthly during important campaigns, the presidents of the regional construction groups will meet with the national leadership (construction presidents conference / campaign committee) to discuss and if need be amend the direct strategy due to recent, unforeseen developments.

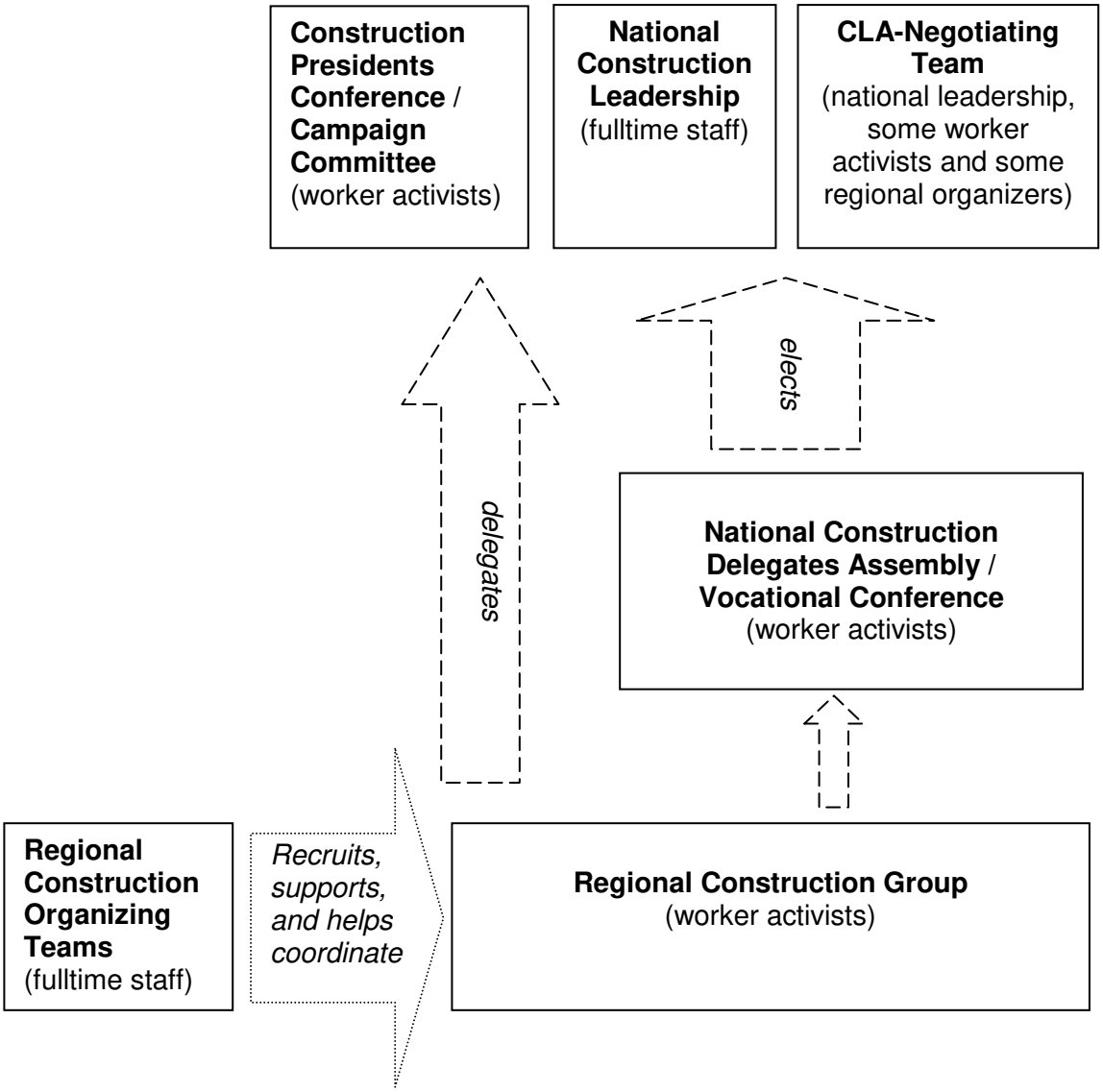


Figure 11: Basic worker activist structures in the construction industry
Source: own illustration

Describing his own experiences at such assemblies and some of the reasons why he participates, one veteran worker activist, Peter, who is also in the CLA-negotiating team, explains that:

I am proud to be a part of it, of helping to decide what goes on in the industry. We as workers can't just always *motzen* (complain) about what we don't like and what's wrong with construction if we don't do anything. Always complaining, but never doing anything about it – that's the sickness of our industry. While we might not always get everything we want [in negotiations], I can look myself in the mirror every day and say I made a difference and I contributed. At the assemblies, we discuss things and we decide things – it's like making history in a way. But it's not only that – I also appreciate the *Austausch* (talks, exchange) with workers from other regions. Be that on a more

serious topic like the new CLA, but also just about what kind of construction sites they are on and stuff like that.

Considering the above, one might be surprised to read the otherwise harsh words in the introduction to this chapter, almost suggesting a union free from membership participation and decision making. And this would indeed be a truly false portrayal when taken in an absolute or undifferentiated way. As usual, the reality in such social phenomena is more complex. Yet when digging slightly deeper and also framing our analysis in the Jena power approach and ideas about collective action discussed in the previous chapter, the comments made by Pedrina above, demanding a fundamental rethinking and "directional change for our culture and current practice" (2009: 2), become substantially more plausible.

Broadly speaking, this involves differentiating between participation in the sense of decision-making and participation in the sense of active, operative involvement in the realization of those decisions made. As delineated above, while the former is to a large extent fulfilled, the latter often tends to take a more backseat role. As described by Michael, a lead organizer in one of Unia's regional construction teams:

> Obviously workers take part in the meetings, rallies and actions we organize and are thus the heart of those actions. Without them, the actions simply would not take place. *Basta*. And it's not always easy to do that. Especially when the actions are more confrontational and during working hours, that involves a ton of courage.
>
> But when it comes to actually planning, organizing, mobilizing and executing those actions, the workers themselves are often not involved enough. That is something largely carried out by the organizers. That's a problem though, because it should be *their* actions and we need to encourage and empower them, or at least the more interested ones, to play a more active role in it.

Thus, according to the diagnosis given above, one echoed by a number of other organizers and activists as well, while worker activists may vote on strategy, elect officials and even decide whether or not to launch as well as take part in industrial action – and these are undoubtedly important things – they tend to be more passive when it comes to the step-by-step, operative organization and realization of that strategy, especially in concrete sequences of industrial action. In other words, while workers per se have to take part in the collective action in question for it to be a collective action in the first place, only rarely do they take on more active roles and

responsibilities in the organizational planning and mobilization process therefor. When deeper operative involvement does occur, it is usually more spontaneous and unconscious, more often than not representing the exception to the rule and often due to the insistence of a perhaps particularly eager worker activist or the gut instinct of a skilled organizer.

In this sense, when it comes to specific participation in industrial action such as protest days, it is perhaps useful to differentiate between two ideal types. On the one hand, you have participants that may fully support the collective goals of the mobilization or may be motivated by social and group factors. They take part in the sense that *they are present*, perhaps even having laid down their tools during working hours. However, they do not actively contribute to the (protest) action at hand besides their passive presence. More often than not, their participation is also highly dependent on the motivation, coordination and organization of the particular action by organizers or in some rarer cases active peers.

On the other hand, and this is at least today the rarer case, you ideally have participants that not only take part in the action through their actual presence, but *actively, consciously and purposefully contribute* to the success of that action – both before, during and after the action itself. Such a contribution can take on a number of forms, from selectively supporting organizers when they hold their presentations in workers' rest containers to independently motivating and organizing the participation of their own crew in a protest action themselves, even without the direct help of union staff. In some cases, especially outside of coordinated campaigns with their clear campaign-plans, this can even mean proactively approaching organizers to initiate some sort of an action. This was the case in early 2016, when workers from one particular construction site told union organizers they wanted to lay down their tools to protest against a new site policy introducing car parking charges – something they then successfully did.

Of course, these two qualities of participation are not absolute, nor exclusive categories but must be imagined as two ends of a continuum. This means that not only can individuals' participation degree be located somewhere in between the two poles, but can also shift from time to time, with the same individuals being more active sometimes and less active at other times. So, while a worker may be more reserved and passive in one campaign, three years later the same worker may be

seen actively driving his crew to a union meeting or protest action in the company truck.

Yet while the second ideal type is far rarer, from the strategic-choice perspective of the union's leadership, it is the ultimate goal. While there is not necessarily a consensus on how to achieve this and there are a number of contradictions involved, the union is generally aiming to create an army of worker activists not only showing up to the battlefield, but ones capable and willing to lead their everyday colleagues and peers onto that battlefield as well – ones not only passively waiting to be activated, but acting themselves as "real protagonists" (Pedrina 2009: 3), as individuals consciously and specifically contributing to a collective process.

Besides ideological aspirations of union democratization and the chance to raise its mobilization capabilities to a greater level than they are today, this transition to a union more strongly carried by worker activists is in the eyes of some trade unionists also a question of survival in today's construction world. To again quote the organizer Michael:

> No matter how great speeches we give and no matter how disciplined we work and no matter what great strategies we come up with: If we are not able to significantly increase our rooting in the workforce by not only being popular, but by actually having workers take on more active roles themselves, then the mix between precarization and repression – and both are getting worse – will kill us. Active worker participation is not just nice to have. In the end, increasing that needs to be one of our main tasks, because not only do we as organizers have limited resources to mobilize and are slowly stretching our limits, but when employer repression really hits, then the only antidote is having a really active crew, one that is not only committed but legitimately believes it is *their action* and as such are more willing to defend it.
>
> I mean, let's take a look at the protest days last November. On the day itself, we [organizers] were literally speeding from construction site to construction site to deal with sometimes severe incidences of employer repression, bosses almost physically preventing their workers from taking part in the protest. And you just can't always extinguish ten fires at once. But imagine if we had committed, trained and active worker activists on each of those sites? Standing up for themselves and for their crews? And as for the workers whose sites were closed that day and told to stay home – imagine if we had worker activists on each of those sites telling everybody of the importance of taking part. And the ones thinking of staying home knew they would have to hang their

heads in shame the next day if they chose to take an easy day at home while their colleagues had been out risking their necks?!

As emphasized in our theory chapter, studies have generally shown that besides the importance of cognitive framing and refined methods for mobilizing, the higher the degree of participation and the more involved workers are in the strategic as well as operative process of decision making and preparation, the higher the turnout will be (Schmalz and Dörre (eds.) 2013).

All this being said, while the changes in the industry leading to less identified, precarious workers may have contributed to this state of "passive participation" and the hegemonial integration of foremen and qualified workers by their employers has undoubtedly added to this malaise, a glance back at the union's own history is perhaps more vital for a deeper understanding. Looking back at the union's original roots as a social movement, it becomes clear that it was not always like this and the present state represents to a large extent an unintended consequence of the organization's own evolution in past political economic cycles.

As elaborated upon in chapter three, throughout the era of welfare capitalism and industrial peace, the more institutionally powerful unions became, the more they themselves altered their functioning (Dörre 2010), morphing from grassroots social movements to large and sometimes rather bureaucratic organizations gradually assuming a more passive-representative role and ritually negotiating with employers without any form of activating industrial action. While many on the political left would perceive these years as ones of betrayal and "selling out" – and in hindsight the union's strategy was no doubt both shortsighted as well as naïve – due to the economic and political atmosphere, one in which employers were indeed willing to grant sometimes significant concessions, such an approach nonetheless had a strong rational aspect to it. This is particularly due to the fact that unions, as Marx critically put it (chapter two), are in fact not revolutionary organizations, but ones operating within the given system with the goal of "absorbing the risks stemming from the commodity character of labor power" and by doing so attempting to "de-commodify" human labor power (Sauer in Deppe 2012: 10f.) – something they arguably achieved in this era.

The side-effect of this integrated approach, however, was that not only was little to no industrial action carried out, but connected thereto a clear neglect was also shown

towards activating and renewing union structures in the workforce. As a (rational) result thereof: Why invest the huge effort in overcoming collective action problems in order to build activist groups embedded in the workforce when they are not actually needed since everything is settled behind closed doors at the negotiating table? Why spend hours trying to convince formal and informal crew leaders to spend hours themselves dedicated to the cause? Why train workers in the arts of collective action, when such collective actions do not take place?

Thus, the "boom economy trade union" became a rather passive "representative organization", in which fulltime union staff were increasingly tasked with getting results *for* the members, not *with* them (Rieger 2016). Besides leading negotiations and carrying out paritarian CLA-enforcement, in time this shift went so far as to include tasks such as keeping minutes of meetings, recruiting new members, organizing local regions' annual general meetings, etc. – duties that had previously all been done or at least actively supported by worker activists. Besides this shift in responsibility (and of course power) from worker activists to fulltime union staff, aided by the more institutionalized place of trade unions at this time, this process also led to the hiring of more union staff, which represented both a product as well as a reinforcement of this process. Thus, not only was less effort gradually placed into keeping and renewing activist structures in the workforce, but even some of the activists themselves did not see the point of being active, as they could rely on union staff to do everything for them. As one veteran worker activist pointed out to me: "Why should I go to a meeting if it doesn't actually make a difference if I'm there or not?"

As already detailed, when the era of welfare capitalism was forcefully pushed aside by a more neoliberally dominated political economy, unions everywhere – including in Swiss construction – were abruptly forced to adapt to a more confrontational stance in order to defend concessions won in earlier days and in some cases even the CLA of the respective industry in general. As described in chapter three and ethnographically enriched in chapter five, in the construction industry Unia has indeed, at least to a certain extent, managed to regain such a conflict capacity and mobilizing ability. While both the changing structures of the industry and employer repression have produced significant obstacles thereto, the union has answered by

developing more innovative approaches such as the phase model described in the previous chapter.

That being said, both due to the dominant organizational culture within the union and especially because this return to a more confrontational stance had to happen rather quickly, this re-embracement of conflict was largely achieved not by fundamentally starting from scratch, but by implementing it through the fulltime professional staff. As such, while collective actions started to once again be carried out and were done so with the (moral) support of the union base, the active responsibility for the organization, mobilization and realization thereof was largely carried by union staff.

As Pedrina points out:

> Our union base often had to be pushed into acting collectively with us. Our manner towards them was often shaped by "paternalism". This perspective shaped the culture of our organization strongly, not only that of the organizing staff, but also of our active and passive base. (2009: 4)

So, while having reestablished the culture and to a certain extent the operative ability to organize and mobilize for confrontational industrial action after years of industrial peace, the union is still struggling to widen and strengthen that ability by empowering worker activists to take more active roles and responsibilities therein.

This is, however, far from a simple task. While perhaps trivial, an organizational culture of *doing things for people* is fundamentally different than one focused on *empowering them to do it themselves*. Not only does each require as well as reproduce an essentially different cognitive mindset when working *for* respectively *with* active members, but the latter process of empowering people to do things for themselves can be a lot more challenging as well as laborious for the individual organizers involved.

As one union organizer describes it:

> We don't even have to talk about mobilizations, let's just take the example of a banner for a demonstration. From a simple cost/benefit perspective of myself as an organizer, it's easier for me to order a banner on the internet – two clicks and I'll have a nice, professionally printed banner sent directly to the union office the next day. Nobody has to do anything and it's not that expensive either. From a movement perspective, however, it makes much more sense to delegate such tasks to a group of activists. Not only do they take on responsibility – even if that is "just" painting a

banner – but they also realize that they themselves are the union and if they don't move, it doesn't get done. And this is something they are not used to. Usually the staff do everything and if not then it just doesn't get done. This may sound weird, but by giving people certain tasks, by giving them *work*, they actually start to understand why it matters that they are active. Translate the whole thing to the question of mobilizing and you've got the importance thereof times ten.

Returning to the double insight that while the union has managed to at least partially regain its ability to carry out confrontational collective action, yet does so by relying on professional staff to organize and mobilize for it, the union's true dilemma in fact becomes clearer. Despite a relatively strong consensus that in the future the union will have to significantly increase the active involvement of worker activists on the operative level of collective action, actually taking the step towards doing that – and accepting the high risk such a change may involve – seems far more difficult. This is not necessarily because union leaders' commitment to a more participatory union movement is lacking, but is in fact paradoxically rooted in the comparatively high level of industrial action in construction today. For considering the key role (staff-driven) industrial action has so far played in not only preventing old concessions from being lost, but leading to new ones as well, there is a certain reluctance to actually introduce a too abrupt change that might upset or destabilize the union's current level of mobilization.

As such, the project of Unia Forte in the construction industry can be seen as a necessary, albeit double-edged sword. On the one hand, as pointed out above by union organizer Michael, an at least midterm shift to a more participatory and grassroots-oriented approach is not only more democratic and "nice to have", but also a vital question of organized labor's survival in the construction world today. On the other hand, given that this means introducing a radical change to the union's current experiences, habits and to a certain extent the skills of both union staff as well as the broader membership, it is a shift that is not without risks. In other words, *it has to be done, but how?* And in which relation to current mobilizing approaches?

As a result of this dilemma, the union has taken to juggling both phenomena at once. While it continues to use as well as enhance the role, skills and strategies of professional staff during mobilizations, as described in the previous chapter, it has simultaneously taken to developing, bringing together and integrating more

participatory aspects into that approach. This includes on the one hand strengthening and broadening the already established role of worker activists in the sense of decision-making participation, yet particularly means going even further towards shifting parts of the operative responsibility for collective action mobilizations to worker activists as well.

And while some organizers and worker activists have already, in limited and usually spontaneous cases, acted in such a sense, truly and more comprehensively introducing a more operative worker participation as an inherent part of collective action indeed represents a profound cultural as well as organizational change within the union, as pointed out by Pedrina (2009). And just like the enhancement of mobilizing practices described in the previous chapter, this is also an endeavor requiring clear and systematic efforts by union leaders, organizers and activists.

One of the regions that has developed a particularly systematic and strategic approach thereto is once again region Mittelland, the protagonist of our last subchapter. Taking a closer look at their ideas in this regard, the following subchapters will allow us to not only explore one of the more complex and strategic approaches aimed at increasing membership participation, but also how it can, at least to a certain extent, go hand in hand with the systematic approach to mobilizing highlighted in the previous chapter, thus simultaneously dampening the risk of a too abrupt change that might threaten the organization's mobilizing capacity. That being said, it also points to the challenges and contradictions involved as well.

"The People Everybody Listens to": the Leaders Concept

When looking at region Mittelland's approach to this question, it is important to remember that it represents both an unfinished one still in development as well as only one possible answer aimed at raising the level of participation by worker activists. While both points must be kept in mind, it is, however, also one of the more complex and systematic approaches currently existing in the union's efforts in this realm. Born out of the greater reflections noted above, yet concretely embedded in the region's own practical experiences during previous campaigns, region Mittelland's leadership came to the conclusion that not only did the union need a more systematic and strategic approach to mobilizing, as described in the previous chapter, but also one more consciously and actively integrating "the key players" of the sites into those mobilizing efforts.

As such, the region is not only attempting to expand the *operative role* of worker activists in general, but also seeking to very specifically recruit *particular workers* into that role. As Philipp, one of the organizers of the region put it:

> What we really realized during the mobilizations in 2011 and 2012 is that we are not only missing a quantity of activists ready to take on a more active role in the mobilization process itself, we are often missing a certain quality as well, namely the alpha dogs in the crews. The people everybody listens to and whose word is as good as gold. Guys that not only support us when we mobilize for protest actions, but who can actually mobilize themselves. So we as organizers can rely on them to transfer the union's message to their crews and we can move on to other, less-organized crews and help them to start moving. That's generally a problem we have today – the success of mobilizations is way too dependent on us and not on our active members. They participate, but they are too rarely the operative motor behind it.

In other words, not only does the union seem to lack a "quantity" of activists taking on a more operative role, it often lacks among its active ranks the formal and informal leaders within the construction crews, individuals highly regarded by their peers and with a high level of *symbolic* and *social capital* (Bourdieu 2002).

Besides the union's very practical observance of the importance of integrating such workplace leaders, this is a factor equally recognized by many scholars studying social movements as well as collective action in general for that matter (Klandermans 1989; Kelly 1998; Ostrom 2000; Tarrow 2011). Using Rick Fantasia's in-depth ethnography of organized labor in the United States (1988) as a platform for a wider discussion, Kelly (1998) describes three general roles workplace leaders play in a mobilization process:

> […] first, they promote group cohesion and identity which encourages workers to think about their collective interests. It also discourages any tendency towards free-riding and is likely to facilitate negative stereotyping of management. Second, leaders will urge workers to take collective action, a process of persuasion that is assumed to be essential because of the costs of such action and the inexperience of many people with its different forms and consequences. Finally, leaders will have to defend collective action in the face of counter-mobilizing arguments that it is illegitimate. (1998: 35)

Kelly goes on to equally emphasize that, precisely in the sense proposed by union organizer Michael earlier, difficulties in mobilizing for collective action can conversely be explained by the lack of workplace leaders active therefor.

The region's answer to this predicament has been to develop a so-called "leaders concept". As the name suggests, the concept not only seeks to generally recruit activists and broaden their repertoire of activities and responsibilities, but attempts to recruit and build already existing *workplace* leaders into *activist* leaders. Such leading personalities can be formally appointed leaders, such as foremen or squad leaders, but can also be informally recognized leaders, i.e. normal workers whose prestige and standing in the group bestow upon them a certain recognition amongst their colleagues, be that due to their professional skills, networks or charismatic leadership personality. Given the social dynamics and hierarchies of the industry as well as the strategic perspective of the union, such leader activists are almost exclusively recruited from the permanent core workforces of the larger and more important construction companies.

In a nutshell, the leaders concept aims to identify, recruit, train and finally integrate these natural workplace leaders into the union's mobilization process with the goal of empowering them to both *persuade* their own crews to take part in collective action as well as to *organize* that participation. The latter can involve making enrolment lists, arranging group meeting points or even using the site's work bus to drive the whole crew to the action in question, thus not only ensuring a means of transportation, but also guaranteeing everybody actually shows up.

The main logic behind this endeavor is threefold. Whether in Swiss construction or in the nursing homes of Western Pennsylvania studied by Lopez, many union organizers believe that "[…] rank-and-file members are more effective organizers because they show workers that the union belongs to the members rather than to a distant bureaucracy." (Lopez 2004: 73). The everyday efforts of the union can thus, quite in the sense of Unia Forte, be better depicted as authentic worker activism and not as some "interference from a third party" (ibid: 69), however well intended the latter might be. In other words, these workplace leaders are, as one organizer summed it up, *Multiplikatoren* (multipliers). Second of all, a stronger and more intense involvement of workers in mobilizations is seen as strengthening workers' commitment to the actions planned as they are not only for their benefit, but

authentically “their” actions. Particularly in the event of employer pressure, such a strengthened commitment can be decisive. And third of all, if worker activists on “organized sites” are willing and able to take over the briefing and mobilization of their own sites, then union organizers can shift their efforts to less “organized sites”, where workers are not yet convinced by or integrated in the union’s campaigns.

While recruiting and activating workplace leaders has been a strategy pursued by a number of the unions attempting to revitalize themselves through innovative approaches, in the context of today’s Swiss construction industry, this can also fulfill a more complex function. As stated above, these workplace leaders are consciously almost exclusively recruited from the permanent, core workforces of the more important and larger companies. This is not only important from a strategic perspective as it makes sense to particularly have the permanent workforces of the industry’s main players organized, but can also serve as a countermeasure to the increased fragmentation stemming from the precarization of labor in the industry. For given the informal hierarchies in construction, seeing the permanent workers of the core workforces take on a more dominant position in the social dynamics of the sites, not only can these workplace leaders exert a high amount of influence over their direct colleagues, but also over other workers on the sites, in particular the temporary ones working directly with the core workforces.

So, just how the union’s mobilizing messages were constructed so as to reach all workers, yet in particular those of the core workforces as described in the previous chapter, recruiting the informal leaders of these groups as union activists feeds just as much into the previously seen logic of “If the permanent workers walk, then so will the others.”

Like the phase model approach, although the mechanisms of this leaders concept indeed include many new elements, the concept is also to a certain extent based on a more conscious systematization of past experiences, ones in which organizers have spontaneously and according to gut feelings integrated workers into the operative efforts of a mobilization process when the situation seemed to call for it.

Union organizer Philipp describes the concept’s development as follows:

First of all, we began by reflecting and analyzing the experiences we had collected in past campaigns. I mean, we’ve known lots of these guys [individual construction

workers in region Mittelland] for years, sometimes decades. And while we had not previously concentrated on systematically building leaders and giving them particular, concrete roles in campaigns, it sometimes did happen spontaneously. I mean, let's say you are on a construction site and you know there has been a lot of repression and the guys are scared. But you also know that the natural leader of the group is a union guy and wants his crew to take part in the action. You intuitively try and get him to help you, even if it is rather spontaneous. So, what we did is to reflect on, analyze and break down such experiences in order to more comprehensively and systematically *reproduce* them.

Second of all, we did not have to reinvent the wheel. We borrowed elements from other unions in different countries that were already further along in this process. Organizing methods that were specifically designed to not only activate, train and develop workplace leaders, but also to do so in situations of repression. Some of us even did short traineeships in unions in other countries. Bringing the two together, our past experiences and knowledge of the construction world here with new ideas about organizing in tricky environments, we began to develop our leaders concept.

From the perspective of the worker, introducing such an approach means that he will have to take on tasks that were hitherto seen as belonging to the duties of the union staff. This, of course, not only means dedicating the time to make this effort, but also exposing himself in front of his peers as well as taking the risk of being singled out in times of employer pressure. It also collides not only with past experiences and taken-for-granted conduct, but also to a large extent with organizers' parallel efforts of mobilizing themselves. As one more skeptical worker explained to an organizer trying to get him to take on a more active role: "I don't get it. Why should I suddenly do your job? I'll take part and all [in the action], but the organizing and convincing is your job. I pay union dues each month!"

From the perspective of a union organizer, this means graduating from the role of a *persuader* to the more complex, didactical role of *coach*. "It's basically *Erwachsenenbildung* [andragogy]", as one organizer described it. In this more sophisticated role, organizers not only have to first persuade workplace leaders of both the benefits of collective action and their very individual role therein, but then train and coach them for taking on the task of "volunteer organizer". As one organizer noted: "This change can be rather difficult for us as union staff. Just because you are

a good soccer player does not make it is easy to then become a soccer coach and teach other people how to play."

Similar to the phase model for mobilization described in the previous chapter, Mittelland's leaders concept is based on a certain number of phases and particular steps, with each building on the previous one. Considering that the main idea of the concept is to recruit the "alpha dogs" in the crews, the logical first phase is that of *identifying* these workplace leaders. Here it is important to again emphasize the double meaning of the term leader. While it is the goal of union organizers to turn these individuals into activist leaders in a union sense, supporting and at some point themselves leading industrial actions, the union's concept is equally based on the fact that the individuals chosen for this job are already leaders at their workplace in the sense of the construction industry's formal and informal hierarchies as well as social and group dynamics. This is particularly important in construction, as "the industry works in a very hierarchal level – we have to use that hierarchy.", as one organizer pointed out. "There are already social structures in the companies and informal leaders already exist. We don't need to build new groups and new leaders, both are already there. We need to find these rare pearls and integrate them into the activities of the union."

Identifying leaders is a multifaceted as well as creative process based on tapping into a number of channels. This can on the one hand involve going through lists of people that previously signed up for taking part in demonstrations, rallies or protests, i.e. digging in the ranks of already active workers to identify those with leadership potential. It can, however, also involve identifying workplace leaders who are not (yet) actually active in the union and perhaps not even members. This may flow from observations during organizers' routine visits to the building sites or may spring from suggestions of other worker activists in the sense of: "You guys have to get *that guy* on board!" While individual organizers or other activists may suggest the notion of a certain person being a potential leader, organizers discuss amongst each other if that really is the case. This is because, as one organizer emphasized: "It's not about finding the guy with the loudest mouth, those aren't necessarily the group leaders. The leaders are often those that say very little, but when they do, their word is god."

Following this phase of identification, in a second step organizers then establish *contact* with the potential leader. In contrast to organizers' routine visits to the

building sites, these individual acquaintance and recruitment talks usually take place outside of the workplace and are longer as well as broader. As one organizer pointed out: “It’s about getting to know the guy, about trying to find out what he really thinks about the union and what he really wants to change in construction, even in society for that matter – and not just what we think or hope that he thinks or wishes.”

As suggested above, when it comes to recruiting such workplace leaders to become activist leaders, especially those not yet active at all, this involves the double process of not only persuading those individuals of the necessity of collective action, but also of the importance of their very particular and individual role therein. Organizers usually begin by asking the workers what their perceptions, hopes and dreams for themselves and the industry are and then laying out the organizers’ long-term vision for the union, one accentuating the union as a participatory coalition of active workers as a vehicle for social change. This portrayal is often contrasted to one of the “old union way”, working as an “insurance company doing everything for you”, but “not really being that strong” (organizer Philipp). Then, placing more abstract notions aside, organizers will often together with the workplace leader draw up a mapping of his own individual social network. Once this is done, usually leading to a dizzying graphic of dozens of other individuals, “you can point out to Manuel or José or whoever it is you are talking to, the very real power he has in his hands.“ (ibid).

Besides being embedded within the crews with whom they work, these workplace leaders are furthermore almost always connected to a vast number of other construction workers in other crews and sometimes even other companies as well. These networks can be equally decisive, for as Tarrow points out: “Social epidemics spread not only because of the sensational nature of the news they transmit, but also because they are carried by people with a rare gift – the gift of being a “connector” – someone who knows lot of people.“ (Tarrow 2011: 57). Translating these social networks into the idea of collective action networks, organizers show the worker involved that by activating the people he knows, he can in certain circumstances unleash a wave of “union power”.

However, given that workplace leaders are identified primarily by their own individual importance in their particular social group and at least not in a first step by their particular position towards the union, the process of recruitment can take a long time and even stretch out into a number of one-on-one meetings between organizers and

potential activists. For as in any labor setting, “Workers do not stand before the labor movement as unfilled containers – as generic “prospective movement participants.” Rather, they have specific experiences, perceptions, and views of unions – and these are not all positive.“ (Lopez 2004: 36). Such potentially negative perceptions can be because of things they read in newspapers, but they can also be products of personal disappointments, such as if the union was unable to help them in a legal case or if they previously got into an argument with a different union organizer about something. Of course, the often confrontational stance of the union can also be polarizing, especially amongst the more skilled Swiss workers with their comparatively high amount of individually-based cultural capital. As such, organizers may first have to build a relationship to workplace leaders and openly discuss the very essence of a participatory union before actually attempting to motivate them to take on a specific role therein.

As one organizer points out:

> This can mean talking over and over again with the very same person a number of times. You can argue, you can point out certain facts, such as how early retirement came to be, and sometimes you just have to show that you are really sincere about what you are preaching, proving that by visibly investing time and effort and also listening. Sometimes though, you have to do all that and just wait for the person to actually experience what you are talking about, for example by organizing a successful action or by always keeping your word, even in difficult situations. What is important though, is that in the end you get a real and clear commitment of “Yes, I want to be an active part of the union.” There is no point in forcing out a halfway-commitment just for the sake of it and then realizing later down the road that the person is not really committed.

When and if the individual workplace leader does in fact give his commitment to taking part in this project, a third phase, that of *training* can begin. While many organizations based on volunteer activism often have a clear and very activism-oriented training program for volunteer activists, be that civil rights groups in the United States in the 1960s or environmental groups today, trade unions have been notoriously slow in developing such measures. In the Swiss labor movement, while political education on such topics as social insurances or the history of the labor movement has long had a prominent place, activist training in the sense of “how to” for collective actions is strikingly absent.

Attempting to fill this gap, the construction team in Mittelland began to specifically train its workplace leaders in the arts of labor activism. Just as the organizers did between themselves, worker activists are encouraged to participate in role plays practicing debating with and persuading their colleagues of the benefits of a large, grassroots-based union and the necessity of collective action. Besides communicative exercises, this training further consists of analyzing social networks, brainstorming activism ideas, discussing the planning and execution of a protest action, etc. While such training is regularly and continuously conducted on an individual basis between activist and organizer, it is also conducted in collective group trainings together with other workplace leaders. In these collective trainings, organizers and activists share experiences and skills and debate various questions and challenges in the realm of organizing and mobilizing. Besides the practical usefulness of collective trainings, such assemblies can be empowering themselves, in the sense of seeing and working with likeminded individuals with similar realities.

When it comes to translating these skills into practice, a steady process of steps is involved. Assuming that “going from zero to a hundred kilometers an hour” is both naïve and unrealistic (organizer of the construction team), these workplace leaders are not expected to start organizing protest actions from one day to another. Rather, organizers may suggest to start with small steps, such as hanging up union posters or stickers in their containers to stimulate debates. Going one step further, workplace leaders may analyze their individual social networks together with an organizer and then “recruit” their own individual supporters who can help them when it comes to mobilizing and organizing participation in collective actions. In a similar fashion as union organizers did with them, workplace leaders are encouraged to arrange face to face conversations with these potential supporters in which they debate union activism and the necessity thereof. Steadily growing in intensity, workplace leaders can then experiment with their own ability to mobilize their colleagues for low-threshold, after-work events, such as the protest rally in March 2015. Considering that the latter event, as described in the previous chapter, was more of an inwardly focused rally and one “only” seeking to mobilize 300 workers, there was more space to experiment than say for example during the more critical mass demonstration in June or November protest days.

Moving on to a more confrontational mode, these workplace leaders can begin to test their conflict ability and assertiveness during bad-weather situations. Precisely because the CLA is rather vague when it comes to setting concrete criteria for when construction sites have to be closed, whether or not a site is actually closed during bad weather is often a result of the insistent efforts either of the workers present or an organizer visiting the particular site. Given the severe time pressure in the industry, site managers are often hesitant to close sites and stop work, even when snow and ice make it dangerous to work. In the case of severe bad weather – and representing a first step towards more contentious collective action – workplace leaders are encouraged to organize their colleagues and approach the worksite manager about closing down the site for the day due to the hazards of working in such conditions. As such actions represent a direct confrontation between labor and capital interests, they not only help to consolidate a group identity based on the identity of being a worker, but they also offer workplace leaders a first skirmish to test their abilities and assertiveness. On the other hand, since bad-weather is in itself not necessarily a direct or visibly union-related issue, there is less risk involved for the budding workplace leader in the sense of exposure to “union busting”.

Building up momentum as well as experience, the ultimate goal is for workplace leaders to slowly develop into the representatives of the union on their site and thus in the long-term be able to motivate their colleagues into collective actions such as demonstrations, protest breaks or protest days. During the protest breaks in September and October as well as the larger protest day in November, in some cases workplace leaders indeed played specific roles when it came to the mobilization process. While far from representing the majority of sites, some were indeed able to mobilize their crews completely on their own.

That being said, when it comes to significant industrial action, today’s reality is on average more one of a cooperative, hybrid effort between staff organizers and workplace leaders. This is not only due to both the lack of experience on the side of organizers as coaches and worker activists as mobilizers in such situations, but further embedded in the dilemma elaborated upon above, one in which organizers are often wary of risking the union’s current mobilization level by experimenting too rapidly. As such, while workplace leaders are encouraged to take on as much responsibility as possible, their roles in the larger, more confrontational actions

organized by the union are currently still embedded within the systematic phase model used by union organizers. In this sense, on most sites union organizers continue to regularly visit the sites themselves and hold their presentations for all of the workers present. However, active workplace leaders can and do actively support the collective presentations of union organizers. This active support can either take on a more spontaneous form in the sense of explicitly repeating and justifying what the organizer just said, but it can also mean workplace leaders taking on a very specific, pre-defined role in the presentation, such as initiating the discussion of whether the crew will participate in the collective action at hand and how to organize that participation (meeting up together at a certain meeting point, organizing a bus to travel together, etc.).

From the perspective of the union, what this does is to not only build workplace leaders in a steady process instead of at once plunging them in at the deep end, but also provides both the workplace leaders as well as union organizers with a safety net in the sense that professional organizers can step in and help at any time.

One of the perhaps most vital roles of workplace leaders in this cooperative effort takes place, however, after union organizers have left. Once a consensus of participation has been reached, i.e. when there is a commitment of the crew to take part in the particular action in question, workplace leaders must defend this commitment against counter-mobilization efforts – either those initiated by individual workers who are against the action for one reason or the other, yet in most cases against employer interventions, such as those elaborated upon in the previous chapter. As the organizer is only on the site for a fraction of the time, yet workplace leaders are of course constantly there, this role can truly be crucial to the success of a collective action. This “[defense of] collective action in the face of counter-mobilizing arguments” is an aspect also highlighted by Kelly (1998: 35) in his debate on collective action and the role of worker leaders therein.

While the union seeks to identify, recruit and train workplace leaders in order for them to help organize and carry out collective action, the latter can also have a reversely positive effect on workplace leaders, thus even strengthening their resolve. Even though mobilizations are to a large extent organized by union staff today, these collective moments of worker unity can contribute to a mutually reinforcing dynamic. For even when workplace leaders are not (yet) the driving force behind these events,

the experiences thereof can be inspiring and encourage them to stay committed even in more difficult situations. This is because, as worker activist Fabio points out:

> Whenever we stand together, flags waving and standing up for our rights, it makes everything much more real. Of course I believe in *uniti siamo forti* [united we are strong] and that's why I am involved [in the union]. But when we actually do demonstrate, it just shows that everything we say is real and not a dream or illusion. It makes me want to do more.

A similar sentiment is echoed by Lopez, who studied organizing strategies of the American union SEIU:

> Collective actions contributed something that face-to-face organizing alone could not, crucial to overcoming experiences and images of do-nothing unionism: a growing feeling of solidarity and power, a sense that the workers were symbolically taking control of the [workplace]. […] This growing sense of collective identity and power made the initial objections of people who worried that the union would not change anything seem palpably absurd. (Lopez 2004: 89)

Besides these very specific acts and responsibilities embedded in the campaign, however, union organizers also make sure that active workplace leaders have opportunities to meet one another and collectively discuss amongst themselves their roles, hopes, fears and general thoughts. While this is done to a certain extent during the two day collective trainings noted above, other more relaxed ideas such as "gala evenings", where workplace leaders can bring their partners, and "spaghetti evenings" are also hosted by the union. As one organizer emphasized: "It's like what Alinsky [well-known community organizer in the 20th century United States] said: We are not doing all of this for fun, but it still can and should be fun!" While at many of these collective events organizers would translate for the various tongued workers taking part, organizers have also come to find it useful to hold other events as well, ones for example exclusively aimed at Portuguese leaders or German-speaking ones in order to provide for more flowing and less clipped conversational opportunities.

Workplace Leaders in their Own Words

After having discussed both the motivation as well as the concept of the union in regards to workplace leaders, three activists themselves will now have their say. For, as elaborated upon by Ariovich (2007: 3) in her own study of union organizing in the United States, while union organizers and activists understandings of their work "may

overlap", they do not necessarily "entirely match" due to their also very different everyday realities and situations. Taking a semi-biographical approach, we will discuss three particular cases that reflect some of the typical characteristics, questions and challenges of workplace leaders and their empowerment witnessed during my fieldwork.

The first of these, Leotrim, has actually been a union activist for some time now, long before the more systematized leaders concept came about. Today 47, Leotrim emigrated to Switzerland from Kosovo in the early 1990s. Having completed an apprenticeship in Kosovo as a metal worker, Leotrim first worked in a factory when he came to Switzerland. "I hated it though, I could hardly ever sleep at night and the doctor told me I should get a different job. So I went to a personnel agency to look for work as a temporary laborer." Relatively quickly, the agency rented him out to a middle-sized construction company mainly carrying out above-ground construction of buildings. Impressed with his skills and particularly his motivation, Leotrim recalls how the company approached him after a short number of weeks, offering him a permanent position in the workforce. As the personnel agency had a clause in its contract with the company forbidding the latter from hiring Leotrim permanently in such a short time, the company told him they would tell the personnel agency they did not need him anymore and he would tell the personnel agency he had found work someplace else. Leotrim has worked for the same company ever since, although it has now been bought up by a larger construction firm.

"I can't remember when I actually joined the union, that came quickly. It was just the thing you did. But I was not really active yet." When asked about how he actually became active in the union, Leotrim immediately traces this back to his youth in Kosovo. He explains that:

> In Kosovo I was politically active as a teenager, even though I was rather young back then. My family was active too. In time, I got into trouble with the police as a result of my activism and so I decided to leave the country. My father was already in Switzerland working as a *Saisonnier*, so it was the logical choice to come here. In a way, political activism has always followed me.

Looking back at the time he actually decided to become a more active member of the union movement in Switzerland, Leotrim points to his personal experiences during the campaign to introduce early retirement around the turn of the millennium.

I forget his name, I'm really bad at names. But I will never forget him. It was a Portuguese organizer who first talked to me about it [the union's fight for early retirement]. And I really remember how he passionately unleashed this fire inside me and I knew I wanted and needed to become active in the labor movement here.

And while this personal conversation with the Portuguese organizer has obviously carried substantial weight for Leotrim, he equally emphasizes that his commitment was "strengthened for eternity" by the collective experiences of the 2002 strike for early retirement. "The organizer told me and inspired me that we should stand together – the strike showed me that it was possible."

Ever since, Leotrim has been a particularly active member of region Mittelland. Not only participating and initiating construction activities himself, he also helped to build an Albanian group in the region focused on community issues specific to Albanian workers. In his own words, Leotrim emphasizes that his self-identity is strongly connected to the labor movement:

My facebook account is just for Unia, I don't have any pictures of my family or some restaurant I am eating at – it is all dedicated to the union. On the construction site, people call me "Unia man". While people sometimes joke about it and pull my leg, I also get respect for it. The other workers, but even the employers treat me differently. My boss is not a fan of the union, but he treats me with more respect since he knows I am really active. But I am also a good worker and proud of that. I believe it is the duty of every union activist to work particularly hard, to do a really good job and to prove that we are actually the best workers. That's why I am also not afraid to get fired, because they would have to fire a really good worker.

Working closely with region Mittelland's organizers in the 2015 campaign, while he was not recruited through the systematic leaders concept described above, Leotrim's activism indeed quite vividly embodied what that concept is about. Besides regularly talking to his crewmates about the union and the campaign, sometimes Leotrim would even take a day off work to accompany the fulltime organizers on their daily tours of other construction sites: "That worked really well, because I could tell the workers 'Hey, I'm one of you guys and I want you to listen.'"

During the mobilization process for the protest day in November, Leotrim essentially organized the work stoppage of his site on his own:

Being that I often talk to the other workers in my crew about the union, they were already in the know about what was going on at the time. They knew the employers were attacking our early retirement and were outraged by it. So, when I told them '*Jungs* [boys], the union is organizing a protest day against the employers' attacks and I think we should participate.', they all agreed rather quickly. So, then I approached the foreman myself and I told him we weren't going to work that day and that I wanted to tell the site manager in person. The foremen looked at me and replied 'They are going to fire you on the spot.' But I just laughed and said 'No they won't!'

I walked up to the site manager and said 'Look, we are not going to work on that day. And not just me, but everybody.' He was kind of shocked and then told me that was a stupid thing to do. So, I said 'If you can guarantee me that the employers won't take early retirement away, then we won't take part in the protest day. Can you guarantee me that?' Of course, he said no and so I replied: 'You see. But I am *anständig* [proper, decent] and I don't want any unnecessary trouble for the company. So, could you please tell all of the subcontractors that they can't come to work then either? Because since we [the core workforce] won't be there and the crane operator won't be there, they won't be able to work anyway. If we tell them [the subcontracting companies] they can't work beforehand, then they won't bill us. Can you do that and show me the e-mail when you are finished?' You should have seen him! [laughing] But it worked. I then told one of the organizers and he said to me 'That was very dangerous what you just did!' But I did it! [laughing again]

Listening to Leotrim speak, we are reminded of something pointed out by Sydney Tarrow in his vast research of social movements. Noting that individuals have diverse motivations for their participation therein and many do not necessarily spring from exclusively material interests, Tarrow points out that: "Movement participation is not only politicizing; it is empowering, not only in the psychological sense of increasing people's willingness to take risks, but in affording them new skills and broadened perspectives." (Tarrow 2011: 221).

However, while union organizers mostly point to the power aspects produced from a more grassroots-oriented union and predominantly emphasize the material interests that can be defended by union activism, Leotrim himself particularly highlights the social aspects thereof and their importance for him – something similarly described by Ariovich (2007) in her studies of an American trade union. Echoing sentiments heard from other activists as well, Leotrim describes the union not only as a political movement, but also as "a second home". As such, he is just as wedded to the

personal relationships he has forged therein as he is to the instrumental aspects of the union as a vehicle for change:

> We need to be in the union, because otherwise the bosses can do with us what they want. But I also have lots of friends in the union, both worker members as well as union organizers. After construction group meetings, we always have a drink together, laugh and have a good time. We organize different social activities and every year we rent a forest cabin and have an annual dinner with the construction group there. That's important to me and it's important to other people in the group. And it's also what keeps everything going.

In fact, this personal aspect is something Leotrim sometimes misses from the fulltime organizers:

> Some of the organizers need to be closer to the *Vertrauensleute* [confidants, activists], to the active people. More networking, more contact, not only during campaigns but in more quiet times as well – that's how you keep people active. Not only by calling on them when you need them. I need to know and trust my organizer – on a very deep level both as union men but also as friends! That's something that is sometimes missing.

In this sense, Leotrim also laments that when organizers in the construction team leave the organization or change to other positions therein, personnel changes that are inevitable to a certain extent, "It always means starting the whole process again. Getting to know people, getting to trust them. Things like that. It's not always easy."

Of course, the importance of informal exchanges and personal relationships as both cement and lubricant for social movements have long been emphasized by scholars thereof (Ariovich 2007; Tarrow 2011). They are, however, also a factor not lost on some union organizers as well. In fact, close friendships often organically rise out of worker-organizer relationships. As one member of the region's construction team recollected:

> I am a woman and spend my days standing in front of many dozens of male construction workers and telling them they need to stand together and fight. So, it is a special relationship to begin with. But since I've worked the construction sites, I have truly established some pretty amazing relationships. I know eighty percent of the workers by name. I even know the names of their children in many cases! We talk together, sometimes eat together, a group of workers even helped me move once. It's not only nice, it's also important because it builds trust.

Summing up his thoughts, Leotrim critically concludes that while they still have a way to go, the union, "our union", as a whole is "much fitter" than it was in past years:

> We are stronger than before and it is clearer to a lot of people that the union – that's us! We, the active members, are the union. That is a right and a privilege and lets us as workers be the ones to decide things. But it is also a duty in the sense that we have to be active. And that is something that we still have to make clear to a lot of people. What that actually means and that it also involves an active effort – even when your wife is mad that you are never home! We also need to do more training, more courses and also learn to confront people when they aren't active enough and expect everybody else to do it all for them. But it also means allowing people to have good experiences so that they clearly see that, well yeah, the union, that's us!

Moving on to a second worker activist, Cedric is a 29 year old, soft-spoken, qualified bricklayer. As part of the permanent core-workforce of one of the largest and most important companies in the country, Cedric is the opposite of a precarious worker. On the contrary, he is part of the minority of formally qualified Swiss workers who rank high in the informal hierarchies of the construction industry. Contrary to some of his peers who feel that with their individual skills and *cultural capital* (Bourdieu 2002) they are not in need of the collective support of the union, Cedric is in his own words "union through and through".

In his mid-teens, when Swiss youth are expected to choose a career path, Cedric looked at the different apprenticeships existing, "especially *handwerkliche* [manual craft] ones". At first he contemplated doing an apprenticeship as a polytechnician or a landscape gardener, even signing up for weeklong trial apprenticeships in such companies. Ultimately though, "I have to be honest, while I knew I wanted to do some kind of *Handwerkerberuf* [manual craft profession], in the end it was actually the high wages in construction that made me choose that particular trade." Given the industry's dire need of apprentices and that especially the Swiss ones are highly valued in construction, in his own words Cedric "did not have a hard time" finding an apprenticeship.

After three years at a semi-large construction company operating mainly in Mittelland, he completed his apprenticeship. "To be honest though, I was not at the prime of my *Leistungsleben* [performance/achievement life] and so when I was finished with my apprenticeship, the company did not keep me on." Jobbing as a

temporary worker for a couple of months, Cedric then completed his compulsory military service. As he chose to serve his time all at once as a *Durchdiener* [full time military for a year], he was away from the job market for one year. “Then I basically got my act together, worked temporary again on a couple of sites and finally landed as a temporary worker on an Anker [company pseudonym] site. After working there for a couple of months, they hired me permanently.”

While he has no concrete plans, Cedric “could well imagine becoming a foreman” at some time in the future. “But I can tell you one thing, they [the companies] need to change a thing or two. Especially concerning working hours. Those foremen have to work like crazy – long after we all go home.” Before being able to commence with foreman training, however, Cedric would have to first complete training as a squad leader and then work for a certain time as such. “I just had my second kid though and it’s important for me to be a good father and actually be there for them. So I don’t have any concrete plans yet. I’m pretty ok where I am for the time being.”

As mentioned above, the company Cedric works at today is one of the largest and most important companies in Switzerland. Active in both rural as well as urban areas and with branches throughout the German-speaking part of the country, the company is a key player in the industry and as such it is important for the union to have active members there. Having joined the union during his apprenticeship when he was 17, Cedric has been a member long before he started working at his current company:

> I actually remember the day I joined. It was at this great construction site that I really enjoyed working on. Then one day a union organizer came by and asked me if I wanted to join the union. The other workers in my crew told me it was a good thing, that as a construction worker you should be part of the union. So I joined. And I’ve been a member ever since. And today I also tell the apprentices that work under me that they should join the union too, because it’s about their future, about the future of their job and their lives.

Like many other of today’s activists, in the first years as a member, Cedric did not immediately become active. This was also due to the fact that he was away in the military for a year and was otherwise jobbing as a temporary worker from firm to firm. After having settled in the company he is today, he slowly began wading into union activism.

I did not really need to be convinced. I am behind the union one hundred percent and I support what they do. I think the point where I really started to become active though was in 2013. An organizer was visiting our site and was talking about how even though the construction economy was booming, we still had not gotten a decent pay raise in a long time. Some of the other workers were interrupting her and so I told them to shut up and they did. After that, I met up with the organizer for a drink after work and we discussed the whole thing a bit deeper. That's when I said I wanted to become active.

Like Leotrim above, while Cedric already identified with the union as an organization and with its goals, his conviction was further cemented by the concrete experiences he made during collective actions. Whether during the pay-raise campaign in 2014 or the larger CLA-renewal campaign of 2015:

Those actions have just really left an impression on me. Marching together, chanting together, fighting together! Just really good *Stimmung* [atmosphere] and a feeling that you are achieving something together. Really doing something together. No matter if that's for a pay raise or defending early retirement. It's just a really good feeling, really inspiring. Flags everywhere, banners, and all that stuff the union organizes, like people abseiling off of buildings and that "60" statue they made for the protest day. It just makes you understand that there is really something behind the slogan of "together we are strong". The support the union has is just really on display and it's massive.

Besides underlining his personal experiences, Cedric's words again point to the double role of *protest performances* (Tarrow 2011: 99), i.e. the visible expression of collective action. On the one hand such animations can be used as an instrument to raise and publically present pressure in a difficult bargaining situation and on the other hand they can add "amusement or excitement to public politics" as well as forging the collective identity of the participants and "helping solidarity to grow through the interaction of the "performers" in protest actions." (ibid).

Yet just as such successful collective experiences can be inspiring and strengthening, setbacks and feelings of being "let down" by one's peers who are less active can be just as disappointing and frustrating:

Something that I will never forget is when a crew I was working with said they would participate in an action the union had planned. They were all "yeah, we are up for it". But when the bosses started to put pressure on them, they all backed down and got scared. And then when the union bus came to pick us all up for the action, just as we had told them to do, the boys hid in the cellar of the construction site! Because they

were too ashamed to even admit they weren't coming. Can you believe that?! That's when I got really mad and just really disappointed. I told them: 'Do you want to stand up for yourselves or do you want to be slaves? Because we can all go back to being slaves if you want!'

Both the positive as well as the negative experiences Cedric has made seem to have shaped his view not only of the union, but of life in general. According to Cedric, it has made him more aware of the fact that "While not everybody has to be active in the same way, what we as individuals do actually matters.":

Especially since that experience I have started to take a more active role when it comes to talking to other people about the union. Sometimes people say 'Ah it doesn't matter, in ten years we will be working 'til 70 anyway!' And it's then that I tell them: 'You know what, maybe we will. But whether or not we do is up to us. It depends on whether we stand together and fight or just simply accept our destiny like pawns on a chessboard.'

Our third protagonist is the newly graduated foreman Toni. With a sharp smile and a laugh that screams mischief, Toni, in his own words, enjoys "standing out in the crowd". An almost fairytale success story of rising to the top from humble beginnings, 31-year old Toni is a passionate construction worker in every sense of the term:

I live for construction. You know what I mean? I couldn't work in an office and I certainly couldn't do what the organizers do, talking, talking, talking all of the time. I need to be outside, moving, working, building, creating stuff. It's hard work, but I love going home after a hard day's work, knowing that I really created something that day. That I worked this or that project, building something that's going to stand there for years to come. I really like working on big projects and I envy the guys that get to do that all the time.

Growing up in Switzerland but of Macedonian origin, Toni emphasizes that "I'm just a guy, I'm not a nationality. I hate that question." Long knowing that he wanted to work construction and someday "pull towers out of the ground", Toni began his apprenticeship to become a qualified *Maurer* (bricklayer) after finishing obligatory school. "I had some difficulties in the theoretical, schooling part of it, but the problems I had there I was able to compensate through working hard and doing a good job in the practical part of it, you know on the sites."

After completing his apprenticeship, Toni knew that he wanted to someday become a foreman, so after a couple of years he took the next logical step and completed his training as a squad leader. Working as such for a number of years, his dream to work on some of the largest, often most impressive building sites in the entire country indeed started to become true: huge housing developments in urban centers, prestigious museum building annexes, colossal new office buildings, etc. Soon after graduating to squad leader, Toni got the permission as well as encouragement of his company to start training to become a foreman. Ambitious and proud of what promised to be a bright career future, he commenced the roughly one and a half year long foreman-program alongside his work as a squad leader. Studying hard, he passed the exam to become a foreman on his second try: “Even though I was at the time working under the craziest foreman alive and worked overtime like crazy!”

Besides this deep passion and identification with his job, his motivation to become a foreman was also linked to income. “Damn, I am seriously looking forward to getting a higher wage”, he confessed to me on the night of his graduation ceremony. “I mean, salaries in construction aren’t bad if you work at a decent company, but it’s not easy with three kids. My wife and I just had our third a couple of months back. As a foreman I can really start making a wage with which I don’t have to be worried all of the time.” Indeed, a successful foreman at a large company can receive a relatively decent wage, particularly when compared to the average construction worker.

Joining the union just after he finished his apprenticeship, Toni was for a long time not an active member. “I mean, come on! I was young, crazy and had a lot of other things on my mind!”, he laughed. After “settling down a little”, he began his “parallel career” as a union activist around the time the region had started to develop its leaders concept:

> I’ve always had clear and strong views about things like justice, but I guess it all really started to become real after I met one of the union organizers during a lunch break one day. It was during a kind of low-scale campaign for a pay raise in 2013 and after the organizer had given a short speech to our crew telling us about the situation, I asked a few more detailed questions because I was interested. We exchanged telephone numbers and a few weeks later he actually called me. So we met up and he just opened up this huge plan to me. That they wanted to get more people involved, that they wanted more active workers, that they wanted to get stronger. I remember I was

actually pretty surprised and had to laugh: 'What you guys want to get even stronger than you already are?!'

So, he started to draw this diagram of lots of little groups of people, different construction crews. He said that when all of them stand together, we can achieve almost anything. But that we have to work for that. Then he circled one or two people from each group and said: 'And to do so, we need the important people in the groups. The people everybody respects.' He then asked me if I wanted to get involved in that, explained that it meant investing time and effort, and I said I did. And that's how it all began.

Taking a day off work for a two-day training course with other worker activists, one on a Friday and the other on a Saturday, Toni began his steep "career" as a union activist with the same passion he has dedicated to his professional vocation. "It was interesting, those two days, what I really liked is that I could tell these people had really done some thinking. They were critical too and really had a plan in their head and wanted to make it real." It did not take long for Toni to translate the ideas he and the other worker activists and organizers had discussed into reality.

Reflecting his broader taste "to stand out in the crowd", I remember first meeting Toni during a protest break at the end of 2014, as part of a more intense campaign for a pay raise and simultaneously serving as a kind of warm up for the upcoming 2015 CLA-renewal campaign. Having blocked a traffic junction with other workers as part of the union's protest, Toni posed and smiled broadly for the cameras of the small army of journalists present. While there were hundreds of workers participating, Toni had also convinced a large number of his own colleagues to take part. The union had placed a long, symbolic "negotiating table" with a throne for the employers in the middle of the blocked traffic junction, criticizing the employers for having broken off wage-negotiations, and Toni and his colleagues spent at least ten minutes taking selfies of themselves sitting at the table and on the throne. Relatively unafraid, Toni commented how: "I am a qualified bricklayer who works his ass off – firing me would be the dumbest thing they could do." Well captured in this seemingly brash sentence is the fact that besides their social skills and standing allowing them to act as successful workplace leaders, due to their often high skills and experience level, these workers are also less vulnerable to threats of dismissal and can thus be particularly effective union activists.

A couple of weeks later, Toni took a leading role in an even more confrontational action. After it had become clear that the employers would not negotiate with the union over a pay raise that year, the union concluded its campaign by holding a delegates assembly in Zurich and then marching with all of the delegates, around 200 plus a number of organizers, through the city and up to the office of the construction employers association. At the same place they would deposit the large "60" statue almost exactly a year later, a well-briefed team of activists and organizers – surrounded by the large group of delegates as well as by a number of journalists – commenced to build a brick wall in front of the entrance to the building. In the thick of the action was, of course, Toni, who demonstrated not only his skills as an impressively speedy bricklayer that day, but also an activist with a clear taste for some of the more unconventional actions. In the weeks following, Toni proudly commemorated that day by making one of the press photos – with him in the center – the profile picture of his social media accounts.

When asked about what motivates him, Toni replies that:

> What I like about the union is that it allows normal people to take their destiny into their own hands. That's why I am active. I could just lay back and do my thing, but that's not my style. And you know what? It sure beats being a nobody and doing nothing that really matters in life!

Taken together with the scenes described above, Toni's statements again point to the insight that while material interests such as wages and even early retirement are an important motivation behind contentious collective action, they are not the only ones. In the words of Tarrow, besides attempting to collectively reach one's material goals as a movement, "the offer of an exciting, risky, and possibly beneficial campaign of collective action may be an incentive in itself." (2011: 29). Yet besides the thrill and excitement of contentious collective action, a sense of agency, of taking one's destiny into one's own hands, can be a strong motor behind the urge to participate in collective action.

That being said, while Toni may be correct that his skills, qualifications and "working his ass off" protect him from more direct repression in the sense of being laid off, the closer Toni travelled down the path of becoming a foreman, the more pressure his superiors placed on him to distance himself from the union. This particularly increased once he had passed his final exam.

"They tell me I'm *Kader* [higher up, part of site-management] now and that I don't belong in the union anymore. That now I have to represent the company and that I am the extended arm of the boss." While Toni explicitly recognizes this as a targeted attempt by his employers to "split the workers", as he puts it, he is equally ardent in his view that the union needs to "do more to show that it is also the organization for foremen":

> That means really showing that the union understands the construction world. Pay-raises, benefits and all that are important – no doubt about that – but what we need to do is also show critical foremen, those who don't give a damn about pay raises because they themselves get them anyway, that not only is the union there for them and their particular problems, but also actually understands their reality. Their everyday-reality!
>
> That means talking about demands that are important for foremen, like ways to reduce stress and overtime. But it also means having a different way of approaching them. Like for example the magazine *Der Polier* that you guys make. There is lots of stuff on construction, new techniques and nice reports about cool construction sites – and not just information on the union's campaigns, which – let's face it – are always kind of the same story. It's especially important because it shows that the union is really *interested* in workers' daily lives. And that it respects their work as a construction worker.

Figure 12: Foremen magazine "Der Polier", September 2015 edition
Source: Unia

While the portraits above are far from complete depictions of the three activists themselves and much less of the broader group of other activists who are gradually becoming socialized in a more participatory style of trade unionism, they nonetheless point to at least three things.

First of all, people's motivations to actually take an active role in the labor movement are not only different and heterogeneous in comparison to one another, but also represent a blend of different factors for each individual in itself. Besides pursuing material interests and the more explicit goals of the union, questions of justice, agency, excitement and identity can be just as important as well as coexistent.

Secondly, workers can and in fact often do tend to be passive union members for even a number of years before making the sometimes conscious, sometimes more gradual decision to become an active union member. At the same time, while the degree of their activism may and usually does develop over time, the decision in itself is not one made in an ivory tower, but often initiated through very concrete discussions as well as experiences with other actors, often union organizers.

Third of all, and this is perhaps the most decisive as well as inspiring insight for the union itself, while it may be challenging and represent both a change as well as balancing act to its hitherto functioning, the systematic recruitment, training and active role taken by workplace leaders is something that can be achieved. Not only that, this approach has also produced fruitful results in areas of activism and mobilizing and points to the real-existing opportunity of rebuilding a more participatory and social movement-oriented labor union – one encouraging workers to take their destinies into their own hands.

Between Mobilizing and Empowering: Challenges and Open Questions

Despite the progress made by the union, the odyssey of transforming the organization towards a more social movement-oriented one involves, as emphasized by Pedrina (2009), a fundamentally new orientation. As such, it must be understood as a cyclical process taking at least "fifteen years" if not more (ibid: 5) – a process of learning, experimenting and developing. This time span is probably a rather conservative guess. For not only does this transformation process involve acquiring, testing and refining new and innovative strategies, methods and skills – from the perspective of organizers didactical skills and from that of worker activists

mobilization skills – but it also means changing decade-old habits, even an entire culture of how the union is supposed to work. And in the particular case of construction, it means doing so in a balanced negotiation with current more staff-driven mobilization models in order not to jeopardize today's established mobilization level, which would in turn endanger the union's capability to defend workers' working conditions, wages and benefits.

As noted by numerous other scholars of the subject (Voss and Sherman 2000; Lopez 2004; Dörre et al. 2009), even when the abstract notion of a more grassroots-oriented and participatory union is something most members and staff agree upon as absolutely necessary for the movement's future, actually translating that into reality is far more complex. From the perspective of the union's members, this means taking over serious responsibility for things which were previously done (or not done) by union staff for decades, but also simultaneously taking on greater risks by individually exposing themselves as union activists. From the perspective of union staff, this means widening their repertoire from one of a persuader and problem-solver to one of an empowering coach – a not necessarily simple task as it is often "easier to solve problems for workers than to teach them how to solve them on their own." (Lopez 2004: 18f.).

In the words of one union organizer, it also means "emancipating ourselves [staff] from the trap of acting as a social worker wanting to do everything for other people, instead of a labor organizer building self-acting structures and encouraging real activism". As the former organizer turned academic Jane McAlevey puts it, referring to "Advice to Rookie Organizers" provided by a US union: „Don't do for the workers what they can do. […] Don't be afraid to ask workers to build their own union. Don't be afraid to confront them when they don't." (2016: 90).

While such a transformation is a challenge for all unions taking this approach, in the specific case of Swiss construction, the process of shifting from a more staff-driven union to one built on members taking on a more active and participatory role can be articulated, among other places, along three concrete obstacles.

First of all, not only is this process of change one that will take a long *period* of time, as Pedrina suggested above, but it is also one requiring a high *volume* of time. For while in the long run building a more participatory labor movement based on active

members will ultimately relieve organizers of certain tasks so they can concentrate more on organizing the unorganized, before this goal is reached, it simply means double the work. Let me clarify what I mean by this. If more workplace leaders are able to independently inform, actively mobilize their crews and stand up to employer pressure themselves, such as Leotrim did above, then this gives union organizers more time to dedicate to less organized and active construction sites, ones where workers are either still unconvinced or too intimidated by employer pressure. However, until "more Leotrims" are actually recruited, trained and have gathered some experience, it means doing both at the same time: mobilizing both more organized as well as unorganized sites and at the same time pursuing the still novel tasks of systematically recruiting, training and coaching workplace leaders.

And while both the complexity of the latter as well as the time-consuming aspect thereof is one thing, given the limited resources of the union, it can and to a certain extent always does compete with the time and resources organizers need to guarantee a certain turnout by mobilizing themselves. It is in this sense that the relationship between the systematic phase model and the empowering leaders concept is an ambiguous one. While it can and does indeed go hand in hand in some situations, the relationship is not always harmonious.

Commenting on this general dilemma, one organizer describes the situation as follows:

> Compared to other industries, we can and do mobilize rather high numbers of workers for actions, demonstrations and strikes. This is not only something we can be proud of, but something that is also absolutely decisive when it comes to preventing employers from taking away workers' rights, let alone to us gaining new ones. Yet it is because of this high mobilizing intensity that there is little room to fail. We have to succeed if we want to protect early retirement for example, and that means mobilizing high numbers of workers into industrial action. So not only does that mean less *time* to experiment, but also less *room* to experiment.
>
> Let me give you an example. At the beginning of 2015, we were doing role plays with workplace leaders all the time and one-on-one coaching sessions on a weekly basis. The closer we got to the protest day in November though, the more the *Alltagsstress* [everyday stress] and pressure of directly mobilizing ourselves took up space. Because we knew we had to make sure people turned out. And we knew we did not have enough workplace leaders yet and the ones we did have were not experienced enough

to really place all of our bets on that card. So in the end, we kind of fell back on old patterns and did a lot of the mobilizing ourselves.

While these obstacles are not necessarily fatal, they do suggest two things. If the union is serious about creating a more participatory union in which workers take on more operative tasks, while at the same time maintaining or even raising its mobilizing capacity, then this will probably entail a long journey of gradually shifting more and more responsibility onto workplace activists. And in the beginning it will definitely also involve channeling *additional resources*, i.e. more organizers, into membership activation so as not to jeopardize the union's current level of mobilization. Furthermore and on the other hand, while "placing all bets" on workplace activists to rather suddenly take over responsibilities carried by union staff for decades would indeed be naïve and even reckless, even a more gradual journey will nonetheless inevitably involve taking certain risks in order to allow workplace activists to even gain the experience necessary for them to actually take on more responsibilities in the future. And this will probably mean failing on certain construction sites from time to time.

The second specifically construction-oriented challenge posing itself to the union in its efforts to recruit the alpha dogs of the sites is a rather paradox one. It is paradox, because on the one hand it points to the success of union organizers in identifying workplace leaders and on the other hand produces an obstacle towards keeping them active. This paradox is rooted in the very logic of the concept and its application in the construction industry. For given that the concept is based on activating and integrating workplace leaders due to their natural leadership and the respect they enjoy by both other workers as well as superiors, the same individuals are often simultaneously identified by their employers as natural leaders. And just as these characteristics are the ones of efficient and successful union activists, they are also the features of good squad leaders and foremen. In other words, the very people the union identifies as leaders are often the same workers who at one point or another will be offered promotions and further professional training. While this can in some cases be aimed against the union, as described in the previous chapter, more often than not it is simply because many companies have a severe thirst for good squad leaders and foremen.

This challenge too is not necessarily fatal, yet it also means that even some of the most committed activists can find themselves in a kind of inner conundrum at a certain point in time. As one organizer aptly described it:

> It's like an inner conflict. On the one hand they [workplace activists] are loyal to the union and to their own colleagues in the sense of "I'm one of them." But on the other hand, it simply can be more difficult for them to take a confrontational stance and say to the same guy that just promoted you or let you go to a training course that "We are going to go on strike on this or that day and we don't give a damn what you say." This does not mean that these activists are suddenly going to leave the union or even stop being active, but it does often lead to the question of *how* and in what way they will be active and what confrontations they are willing to risk.

Besides this inner conflict stemming from metaphorically biting the hand that feeds you, when workers do in fact get promoted to being a squad leader or foreman, employers will indeed often point to as well as actively construct a *Kader*-identity as a supposed reason for those employees not to be active in the union. This is a phenomenon described in the previous chapter, but also in the case of Toni, our third protagonist described above. And while the union is developing more target-group-specific material and approaches towards activating foremen and squad leaders, this structural challenge stemming from *Kader*-workers' "sandwich position" between the wider workforce and management is not something that will suddenly disappear. It will require the union to not only continue to develop new and innovative ways of communication, such as the (for union standards) unconventional magazine *Der Polier*, which places a high emphasis on technical work issues instead of exclusively political topics, but above all it will again require time, effort as well as open and honest discussions and one-on-one conversations – as well as the dialectic insight that there are perhaps some contradictions that are not entirely curable.

And finally, a third challenge for the union in developing a more participatory modus operandi is not actually located in the intensity of exciting and often nerve-wrecking campaigns, demonstrations and protest days, but in the spaces in which these are in fact glaringly absent. In other words, how can participatory activism be kept alive in between campaigns?

Considering that for one the union has the opportunity to carry out a campaign at least every three years when the industry's CLA is renewed and secondly that many

people do not necessarily want to sacrifice large portions of their free time at the costs of their friends and family but are willing to do so during concrete campaigns, this is to a certain extent a luxury problem. On the other hand, if the union truly aims to construct a grassroots-oriented and participatory union, this will involve more than simply "taking activists out of the refrigerator each time they are needed", as one worker activist critically put it, but introducing a continuity of participation from one campaign to the next, as well as in the liminal spaces in-between each of these.

There is no easy answer to this and as Dörre et al. (2009: 49) point out, when it comes to "[sustaining] a participation-oriented style of politics […] in the long run":

> […] it is not only difficult but downright impossible to sustain a high level of participation by the members over longer periods of time. Both old and new members can only engage in participatory work for a certain amount of time and connected to specific issues and projects; but they do this when there are critical decisions to be made, not merely to pay service to participation rituals. Thus, even the most intelligent 'organising' approaches will always be confronted with the problem that participatory and representative approaches must alternate and complement each other. In other words, membership participation, or even membership control of the organisation, are not possible without strategic planning and intelligent leadership of the trade unions (Crosby 2005). (Dörre et al. 2009: 49)

As such, this "strategic planning and intelligent leadership of the trade unions" will probably have to accept that the answer to this dilemma will inevitably involve a mix of indeed sometimes having less intense and thus to a certain extent less participatory time spaces, but also channeling the energy of at least some of the workplace leaders active during mobilizations into the more formal and structural roles of membership participation – such as those noted in the beginning of this chapter. And while delegates assemblies and sometimes seemingly ritualistic voting procedures may not necessarily fulfill the more exciting and agency-reinforcing functions guaranteed by collective actions during campaigns, they may raise activists identification with the movement in a sense of "the union – that's us!" And last but definitely not least, the integration of more and new worker activists in the decision-making structures of the union is a central pillar for ensuring that the future of the labor movement is not only one in which workers are the "protagonists" of industrial action (Pedrina 2009: 3), but also a democratic future in which workers remain the decision makers of the movement itself.

Part IV

Conclusion

7. Organized Labor between Changing Structures, History and Strategic Choice

„First comes the nervousness, then – perhaps – the celebration." This description of the atmosphere by one of the seasoned worker activists present indeed summed up the mood at the union delegates assembly rather well – and would also prove to be a correct prediction of the day as a whole. For on this day, a cold December morning at the end of 2015, the construction worker delegates of Unia would decide the fate of their CLA and early retirement.

Not even a year after the launching of their campaign at the beginning of 2015, a scene described in the introduction to this thesis, a negotiation result was on the table. Considering that up until mid-November the employers had even refused to negotiate at all, this potential breakthrough came as quite a surprise to many. While many observers as well as participants expected some kind of a compromise at some point in time, few had expected it so soon. Even the construction leadership of the union itself had already drawn up plans for strikes at the beginning of the year in anticipation of a contractless period as the CLA would have expired by then.

Of course, what was on the table had not been produced in a vacuum and was also not simply due to the "good negotiating skills" of the union's negotiating committee, as one union leader emphasized. To the pride of the organizers involved and especially the thousands of worker activists who had played their part in some way or another, the campaign in 2015 had seen the largest worker mobilizations of any single industry since the strike for early retirement in 2002. Besides worker assemblies after hours as well as daily encounters and actions on the construction sites, the mass demonstration in June involving 15'000 workers, the protest breaks in September and October and finally the work stoppages by 10'000 workers on the protest days in November represented the pinnacles of the campaign. Accompanied by intense media work and the glaring threat of the CLA expiring at the end of the year – something no side necessarily longed for – these mobilizations had a visible effect. "They [the employers] went from explicitly saying they would not change a thing on FAR [early retirement] to offering us exactly what we wanted!" as one activist cheerfully summarized it.

On this day, an exceptionally convened worker delegates assembly was being held at which the delegates would vote on whether to ratify or reject the "CLA-package" that the union's negotiating committee, together with the smaller Christian union Syna, had negotiated with the Swiss Construction Employers Association. The proposed agreement was as simple as it was significant. In what had astonished many onlookers, the construction employers association had given in to the union's demands concerning early retirement. The employers agreed to pay 1,5 percent more (in total 5,5 wage-percent) and employees were to pay 0,5 percent more (in total 1,5 wage-percent). The financial future of early retirement at 60 would thus be secure and without the reduction of any benefits whatsoever.

However, as agreements seldom are, it was not one covering all of the union's demands. While a new clause forbidding wages to be paid out in cash would be introduced as a measure against wage-dumping and the employers conceded one more franc daily lunch pay (from fifteen to sixteen francs) as of 2017, otherwise the CLA remained rather unchanged. This meant on the one hand that no concessions whatsoever had to be made to the employers, but also that the union would have to wait for clearer criteria to stop work during bad weather and also for more significant measures against wage dumping. There was, however, a clause in the agreement seeing that these points would continue to be negotiated in the summer of 2016.

So, while many of the delegates seemed to so far be rather pleased with the result, there was nonetheless opposition. In the debate part of the assembly, opinions of both strands were expressed and articulated in a variety of ways, always very emotionally, by speaker after speaker. While one worker would take to the stage and declare that "We got exactly what we wanted. We fought and we won!", another would complain that "This only covers a part of what we wanted!" And while one would emphasize that "Defending early retirement was by far the most important of our demands and we all know that!", another would again counter that "Yes, but we can keep fighting to get the rest!" And then another "Yes, but we will do that – we are negotiating next summer again!" and so on, and so on.

Finally, after a seemingly endless debate on the subject, it came to a vote. In the end, 88 of the worker delegates voted for the package and 11 against with 8 abstentions. For the most part, an emotional mix of relief, pride, joy and sense of achievement exploded in the room and most of the delegates present began to clap

and smile. People started hugging each other and at least one wiped tears from his eyes. Even many of those more critical of the result smiled and gently clapped.

Afterwards, during a round of drinks following the formal part of the delegates meeting, where most of the participants were chatting in groups and watching pictures and videos of the now concluded campaign, the national leader of the construction sector again addressed the crowd:

Colleagues, one last thing. When you go home today, please feel free to take one or more of the chocolate bars laying in the boxes at the exit. Since we truly did not expect to get a result so quickly, we already ordered 10'000 chocolate bars with our logo on them for the strikes in April. And now we don't know what to do with them!

The room burst into laughter, reflecting the emotional blend of joy, relief and pride.

While bad weather protections and more stringent measures against wage dumping indeed remained so far unachieved, the defense of retirement age 60 without the reduction of any benefits was remarkable, in particular considering the wider political atmosphere of the time. Besides the fact that employers had long stated that they would not even consider exclusively raising the retirement institution's dues, even suggesting that on national television just a month before the breakthrough, there was also a high amount of pressure on them not to do so from the employers of other industries and conservative political actors. Less than a week before the negotiation result was forged, the right wing magazine *Die Weltwoche* devoted an entire article to the subject and enthusiastically lobbied against giving in to the unions:

The union is trying to pass on the repair costs to the employers: Higher contributions largely from the companies are supposed to close the [finance] gap. […] The impact of such a negotiation result would be explosive for the rest of the economy and politics as well: A union victory would be the signal that raising the working lifetime in dialogue with the social partners is chanceless. That would be poison for the upcoming debate in parliament about raising the general retirement reference age […]" (Gygi 2015: 40)

Not least considering this loaded political context, union activists' and leaders' satisfaction with the negotiation result is understandable. In the months following,

union organizers toured the construction sites throughout the country, informing workers of the “victory of saving retirement age 60”. [15]

And just as the union’s campaign for a new CLA and the defense of early retirement is now concluded, so now do we arrive at the conclusion of our social scientific exploration thereof. When thinking back to our main research question as to how the union is coping with the multiple challenges arising from the context of a changing and increasingly hostile Swiss construction industry and how is it seeking to enhance its power as a collective agent shaping industrial relations, the answer reveals itself as an undoubtedly complex one. Representing a blend of historical legacies, changing political economic structures and the union’s specific agency itself, it is perhaps best explained starting with the result of the negotiations.

Looking back at the Jena Power Approach as well as at Jack Knight’s thoughts on how social institutions are born and shaped, it seems safe to say that the conditions and developments leading to the negotiation result were based on a complex interplay of the different power relations at play. On the one hand, today’s rather established institutions of social partnership in construction have played and continue to play an important role in cementing the general idea of a collective labor agreement as something in the interest of both labor and to a certain extent also capital. While born out of conflict in the pre-war era and at first something vehemently resisted by the construction employers association, in time many employers began to perceive the industry’s CLA as a stabilizing instrument solving their own collective action problems – especially in the domestic market of construction with today’s extreme time and price pressure and the threat of “wild” competition in an open European market. As such, considering that the CLA was to expire at the end of the year, this mix of structural and institutional power placed a certain amount of pressure on capital to find some kind of a solution sooner rather.

That being said, as already described in the chapters above, while this interplay between structural and institutional power played into the union’s hands, it only set the stage for having a CLA and not one defining what exactly that CLA entailed or what the fate of early retirement was to be. This is particularly the case today, as the

[15] In 2016 and 2017, the unions and employers continued negotiations concerning the “open points” not yet settled in the 2015 agreement. While bad weather protections were still not achieved, the union managed to negotiate a number of substantial and long demanded improvements in the industry’s collective labor agreement.

“golden age” of welfare capitalism has passed (Deppe 2012: 23) and many employers are no longer willing to provide significant concessions if not in some way pressured to do so. In other words, in construction the necessity of rules of the game seems to be agreed upon, which represents in itself a favorable starting point, but which rules exactly remains an open question. This was a lesson the Swiss labor movement, as well as unions across the globe, had been forced to learn the hard way not too long ago.

It is here that the union’s other power resources come into play. In a sense of societal power, the union accompanied its campaign on the construction sites with very public efforts to highlight the defense of construction workers’ early retirement in the media and thus in the wider public sphere. This included press conferences, press releases, interviews with both union activists and leaders and so on. That being said, while these narratives were indeed taken up by the media, the latter was (unsurprisingly) particularly interested in and reported on the collective protest actions organized by the union.

This in turn leads us to the union’s most vital power resource: its associational power. Besides representing to a high extent the key to accessing structural, institutional and societal power in the first place, the importance of associational power is emphasized by both the Jena scholars (Arbeitskreis Strategic Unionism 2013) as well as by the original thoughts of Marx himself (1969) and even by Jack Knight (1992). This importance is derived from the fact that since workers’ labor power represents the key ingredient for capital accumulation, as the production process is completely dependent on it, workers are in a position of a high amount of potential bargaining power – if they can organize collectively to use it. Thus, the workers’ demonstration in June, the protest breaks in September and October and the full work stoppages in November played a pivotal role in shaping the ultimate negotiation result.

Of course, accessing this associational power by organizing and activating individuals to collectively pursue their interests does not come automatically, even when recognized grievances exist (Thompson 1971; Kelly 1998; Tilly and Tarrow 2007; Tarrow 2011). For it requires having a membership not only willing to pay dues, but one also willing to act (Arbeitskreis Strategic Unionism 2013: 354). Besides the financial and time costs involved in this, in the realm of contentious collective action in industrial relations, this also carries with it very real risks as well.

Furthermore, building associational power means overcoming both more universal as well as more industry-particular obstacles to collective action. For not only has the world of industrial relations in Swiss construction gone through a significant process of change, moving away from welfare capitalism and towards a more neoliberally oriented one, the "recommodification of labor" (Standing 2007) this transformation has brought with it has also created a more precarious and fragmented workforce that is more difficult to organize and activate. Furthermore, employer pressure aimed at stifling the union's collective activities has grown significantly – something visible throughout the sphere of neoliberal capitalism. And finally, taking the union's own history into account, after decades of industrial peace and a more corporatistic form of social partnership, assuming a more confrontational approach under these conditions has come to represent a process akin to "relearning to walk".

And it is here that our main research question becomes prominent.

From an empirical standpoint, it has become clear that the union is attempting to revitalize itself by developing new and innovative strategies of worker mobilization in order to strengthen its associational power. Focusing our view on one of the union's most innovative local units, region Mittelland, we saw organizers develop an approach based on both highly systematic methods joined by a creative model of collective action frames. On an organizational level, this meant radically changing the structures and modus operandi of the region's staff. On a strategic level, this approach meant graduating from a gut-level mobilizing approach to a process-oriented one based on systematic, strategic and goal-oriented methods.

Besides strict mathematical planning and essentially ethnographic mappings, this has involved placing a strong focus on the micro-mechanisms of collective action and developing a model based on the ideal typical phases of a mobilization process. Filling this model with collective action frames appropriate to the campaign at hand, organizers develop escalating narratives seeking not only to persuade workers of the moral justness of the cause (Thompson 1966; 1971) but also of the rational utility of collective action (Klandermans 1984; Tarrow 2011). While this *phase model* has not and cannot fully do away with both universal collective action problems as well as those stemming from the particular developments in the Swiss construction industry today, it has provided organizers with a fruitful base to enhance the union's

mobilizing capacities by taking a more systematic and process-oriented approach in an otherwise chaotic and fragmented setting.

That being said, with the pressure from employer interventions growing and the fragmentation of the construction sites intensifying, this staff-driven approach can only go so far. It is in this sense that the union has sought to simultaneously introduce a more emancipatory and grassroots approach seeking to empower and delegate more tasks to workplace activists themselves. Besides a political claim towards democratizing the labor movement, union leaders are equally convinced that such a "rank-and-file-intensive" (Bronfenbrenner and Juravich 1995) approach is key to a long-term stabilization and enhancement of the organization's mobilizing capacity in today's more difficult environment. For not only does it have the long-term potential to increase the union's total resources through passing on certain tasks to worker activists, but through emphasizing that the union belongs to the workers themselves and not to some distant third-party bureaucracy, such an approach can, if successful, significantly increase the union's rooting and organic strength.

However, just like collective action in general, the realization of such a dream does not come free either. And it is here, in fact, that the union's own history plays an ambiguous role. During the years of welfare capitalism, when unions took on a more corporatistic role and largely confined their activities to representing and negotiating *for* workers and providing them with individual legal advice, the role of the fulltime professional staff grew significantly. This was, however, done at the cost of worker involvement and activism. And while the union has meanwhile slowly been able to regain a more confrontational approach and bring effective workplace mobilizations back into the game, it has done so with "a crucial limitation: the steps in this direction have mainly been realized by paid union staff." (Pedrina 2009). It is for this reason that such an approach of *Unia Forte*, seeking to build a more grassroots-carried union, requires a fundamental rethinking and "directional change for our culture and current practice" (ibid) – both on the part of union organizers as well as on that of the members themselves.

In Region Mittelland, organizers have taken an equally novel and systematic approach in this realm as they have in that of (staff-driven) mobilizations. This has involved developing, testing and refining new and innovative strategies, methods and skills not only encouraging workers to participate in the democratic decision-making

process of the union, but also activating them to take on more operative roles in the organizing and mobilizing process for industrial action as well. Derived from breaking down and analyzing organizers' own experiences of the social dynamics on the construction sites as well as borrowing innovative ideas from other unions in different countries, the construction team of region Mittelland designed a so-called *leaders concept* aimed at identifying, recruiting, training and empowering workplace leaders to take on more concrete responsibilities in the realm of activism and mobilizing. While the union is far from where it one day hopes to be, organizers' and activists' experiences in this area point to the high potential of such an approach.

Yet besides the fact that such an approach means developing new skills and changing decade-old habits for both staff and activists alike, thus demanding an organizational as well as cultural process of change, the relationship between this leaders concept and the systematic staff-driven mobilizing model described above is not free from contradictions. While the two can and sometimes do go hand in hand, their relationship is not always harmonious, thus leading to a complex balancing act for the union. This concerns on the one hand time and on the other hand risk. For given that the identification, recruitment, training and coaching of workplace leaders is a particularly time-intensive and delicate undertaking, this can compete with the resources staff organizers need to guarantee a maximum turnout by mobilizing directly themselves. Furthermore, due to the often uncertain outcome and various factors involved in this new endeavor, especially considering the deep cultural and methodological changes in question, organizers are often wary of giving up too much operative responsibility too quickly in order not to jeopardize the union's current mobilization level, which would in turn endanger its capability to defend workers' working conditions, wages and benefits. This caution is paradoxically intensified by the fact that the union already has a comparatively high level of mobilization in construction, thereby setting a relatively high benchmark and providing "little room to fail" or "experiment", as we heard one organizer put it.

While these obstacles are not necessarily fatal, they do suggest two things. If the union is serious about creating a more participatory organization where workers take on more operative tasks while at the same time maintaining or even raising its mobilizing capacity, then this will entail a gradual journey of continuously and delicately shifting more and more responsibility onto workplace activists. In the

beginning, this will no doubt involve channeling additional personnel resources, i.e. more organizers, into worker activation so as not to compete with the currently for the most part functioning phase model and thus jeopardize the union's current level of mobilization. On the other hand, while placing all bets on workplace activists to suddenly assume all of the mobilization tasks that were for years carried out by union staff would indeed be naïve and even reckless, even a more gradual change will nonetheless involve taking risks. For only through experience and practice will organizers gain the know-how they need in this still novel realm and only then will the workplace activists themselves build the skills necessary for them to truly take on more responsibilities in the future. And this will probably involve swallowing setbacks from time to time.

In the end, it will be decisive that organizers not only themselves learn to let go to a certain extent, but that they do so by actually *empowering* worker activists through concrete training and "on the job" coaching. Furthermore, by involving workers in the decision-making process during and particularly in-between campaigns, not only can gaps of non-mobilization be filled and key activists kept active, but workers' identification with the labor movement can grow and the protagonists of collective action can simultaneously be the decision makers of the movement itself. So, while the union's strategy and dream of a labor movement in which workplace activists take on greater roles no doubt hold great promise – especially considering the growing challenges to collective action in Swiss construction – it is at the same time clear that this represents a long process of change. As McAlevey puts it, when it comes to organizing and empowering workers to take their destinies into their own hands, there are "no shortcuts" (2016).

From a theoretical standpoint, a number of insights have also become apparent. First of all, we can confirm the emphasis placed by our theoretical inspirations on the importance of organized labor's associational power and the ability of carrying out collective action as a means to pursuing workers' collective interests. For as we have been able to witness throughout this thesis, while the union has other power resources available to it and can and should use them, such as institutional and societal power, not only are the latter often highly dependent on outside factors, such as the wider political debate on the bilateral agreements with the EU, but even they are ultimately only accessible through associational power. Furthermore and more

fundamentally, in more tense times of a neoliberally oriented political economy, organized labor has far less societal and institutional opportunities as it may have had in the more quiet times of post-war welfare capitalism. Thus, the question of "who will control the revenues of the firm's production process and how they will be distributed" (Knight 1992: 195) is directly dependent on the "relative bargaining power of workers" (ibid: 197) and their "ability to organize and act collectively." (ibid).

Of course, as equally pointed out by a number of our theoretical pillars, this means that the "fundamental task for workers in the market is to resolve the collective action problem vis-à-vis firms." (Knight 1992: 197). While this may not be an easy task, the thesis at hand points to a case in which collective action is neither pessimistically improbable, as Olson suggests, nor optimistically given, as some of the more orthodox Marxists seem to assume. Instead, concerted action in pursuit of collective interests is actively constructed in a complex and processual dialogue between the structures of a changing political economic and institutional environment, the historical development of industrial relations and the union's own specific agency in the form of innovative and effective strategies of union renewal. So, while some of the general and universal obstacles to collective action as depicted by Olson and his methodological individualist followers are not necessarily wrong per se, they are only one fragment of the entire field and demand a more holistic picture.

On the one hand this means expanding our scope from universal obstacles to collective action to one asking how the particular structural challenges stemming from the political economic, institutional and historical conditions of the particular setting shape and influence collective action. As we saw in our empirical exploration of the subject, such a task involves looking at the barriers (and occasional incentives) presented by the institutions of the industry, such as the CLA and the paritarian funds, as well as at those born out of the structural changes in the organization of the labor world, such as the recommodification of labor and the fragmentation of the workforce resulting therefrom. As Durrenberger and Reichart remind us, collective action must be seen not simply as some natural process unfolding in a social vacuum, but as one embedded in historical, cultural and political matters (2010: 6).

On the other hand, this means shifting our angle from structure to agency itself and studying the very specific choices actors and organizations make and how they strategically act in their particular environment – both coping with obstacles and

exploiting opportunities. Like Lopez who was inspired by Melucci, we are thus encouraged to think of collective action not as a *causal effect* of something, but far more as an *accomplishment* achieved by meaningful actors (Lopez 2004: 217f.). And just like Burawoy, the Analytical Marxists and the institutional theory of Jack Knight encourage us as social scientists to focus on the micro-mechanisms of collective action, so too must the actors seeking to unleash collective action themselves analyze, understand and sharpen their own micro-level interactions. This involves, as we were able to see, a high amount of learning capacity, organizational flexibility and also framing skills, as emphasized by the Jena scholars (Arbeitskreis Strategic Unionism 2013). Far from any purely intellectual exercise, however, understanding and developing such micro-methods are further embedded both in actors' concrete experiences and practice as well as in the fact that "People do not simply "act collectively." […] contentious politics is not born out of organizers' heads but is culturally inscribed and socially communicated." (Tarrow 2011: 29).

Bringing these two points together, it becomes clear that while social actors pursuing collective action have a large amount of agency and strategic choice, they do not act in a voluntaristic way free from universal and (industry-)particular obstacles and also do not act independently of their own historical legacies. The latter was vividly on display first as the union sought to reestablish its conflict ability at the dawn of a more neoliberally dominated political economy and then sought to consolidate and strengthen that stance through empowering worker activists themselves. While both shifts are necessary if organized labor is to remain a relevant actor in industrial relations, they have collided with decade-old habits and ingrained modi operandi. It is in this sense that we can only confirm Marx's famous proclamation that social actors "make their own history, […] but under circumstances existing already, given and transmitted from the past." (Marx 1999). And while these circumstances are, as Rothstein pointed out from an institutionalist perspective, not necessarily of their own choosing, they may well be of their own making (Rothstein in Dörre et al. 2009: 38).

Furthermore, it becomes evident that when theorizing labor renewal and the building of a union's associational power, it is important to look at this not as something either exclusively achieved or not, but as a multilinear journey. Consisting of interdependent developments of interest sensitization, collective identification, mobilization and demobilization, the collective action involved in this journey reveals itself more as a

social process than as any absolutistic state. For while each event and action must be constructed and organized on its own, past experiences of successful collective action can serve as an incentive for and reinforcement of collective action in the future. Representing "embodiment[s] of oppositional practices and meaning" (Fantasia 1988: 17), collective protests thus do not only serve as a bargaining tool vis-à-vis capital, but also as a subjective tool creating "cultures of solidarity" (ibid) that can serve as the basis for future actions. Or in the words of the two Swiss labor veterans Pedrina and Hartmann:

> […] strikes are more than just a show-down in poker for this or the other piece of the pie. Strikes are also intensive collective learning processes exercising long-term influence on the *Handlungsperspektive* [perspective of agency] of societal forces in social conflicts. (2007: 89)

Finally, as emphasized by the Analytical Marxists, we must remember that collective action in industrial relations is neither exclusively collective nor completely made up of disconnected individuals. As discussed in the theory chapter of this thesis and seen later on in the empirical section thereof, collective action demands to be treated as a process involving individuals and their (often different) rational calculations, but also as one in which these individuals act embedded in dynamic social relations with others. As Przeworski points out: "The appropriate view [of collective class conflict] is neither one of two ready-to-act classes nor of abstract individuals, but of individuals who are embedded in different types of relations with other individuals within a multidimensionally described social structure." (1985: 393). Thus, as elaborated upon by Klandermans (1984) and reinforced by the empirical episodes in this ethnography, potential collective action participants make their calculations based on individual and collective material interests as well as on positive and negative social motives.

Coming to our theoretical conclusion, when looking back at our scientific mission as encouraged by Burawoy's thoughts on the extended case method, urging us to not only use theory as an explanatory instrument but also as a broader scientific platform upon which to debate our empirical findings, we can establish that our study does not unmitigatedly confirm or negate specific theories, but highlights the acute strengths and weaknesses in a set of relevant theories. It thus points to the decisive necessity of bringing different theoretical schools into active debate and discussion with one another. Far from an exercise in incoherent eclecticism, however, we have attempted

to construct adequate theory networks (Bollig and Finke 2014) as an innovative way to explain complex and multilayered social phenomena. While probably helpful for a wide range of social scientific questions, the assembly of such broad theoretical toolboxes are a particularly fruitful and necessary undertaking when it comes to organized labor. For as Durrenberger points out, unions "as social, political, cultural, and economic phenomena" (2007: 75) demand a particularly comprehensive theoretical approach touching upon a wide range of social questions.

While our own ethnographic study is now concluded, the work does not stop for the actors we explored. As witnessed throughout this thesis, union revitalization is a many-layered, experimental and practice-oriented journey, one ideally accompanied by a constant learning process. As such, the union must continue to sharpen both its tools of systematic mass mobilization and of worker activist empowerment and interweave the two in the most mutually reinforcing way possible – while at the same time recognizing and dealing with the inevitable contradictions entangled in such an endeavor. Furthermore, following the mundane truism that the only constant is change, the union will have to incessantly keep track, study and analyze the changing labor world and the shifting power asymmetries involved so as to not only be able to better cope with today's obstacles to concerted action, but also to anticipate future ones so as to not again be "caught off-guard" (Oesch 2011) as it was during the dissolution of the "golden age" (Deppe 2012: 23) of welfare-capitalism.

In a similar sense, the work of social scientists studying the phenomena involved in this attempted labor revitalization must also continue. Not only do such studies provide us with a rewarding stage upon which to explore and debate the complex relationships between political economic upheavals and strategic actors' choices and actions, thus furthering scientific knowledge in general, but in the turbulent era in which we live today it is our duty to do so. As pointed out in the introduction, in the uncertain and often worrying times in which we live, developing a better understanding of our changing political economy as well as of the everyday lives, hopes, fears and dreams of the actors within is essential. For while each and every scientific contribution will not in itself "defend the interests of humanity" as proposed by Burawoy (2005b), as a whole the social sciences can and must play an important role in at least providing the knowledge necessary to try.

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